

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

# BEYONDERS

THE COMPLETE SET



“AN IRRESISTIBLE MIX OF ADVENTURE, HUMOR, AND MAGIC.”  
—**RICK RIORDAN**, author of the Percy Jackson series, on *A World Without Heroes*

# BRANDON MULL

AUTHOR OF THE FABLEHAVEN SERIES



# CONTENTS

A World Without Heroes

Seeds of Rebellion

Chasing the Prophecy

# BEYONDERS

A WORLD WITHOUT HEROES



"AN IRRESISTIBLE MIX OF ADVENTURE, HUMOR, AND MAGIC."

—**RICK RIORDAN**, author of the *Percy Jackson* series

# BRANDON MULL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE FABLEHAVEN SERIES

Praise for *A World Without Heroes* —◆—

“Brandon Mull is a wizard with words. With *Beyonders*, he has conjured one of the most original fantasies I’ve read in years—an irresistible mix of adventure, humor, and magic.”

—Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson series

★ “Mull moves his story at a brisk pace . . . offering ample action and feisty dialogue to keep fantasy lovers entertained.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review “Readers will be kept off-guard and on the edge of their seats from the first page. Perfect for fans of Rick Riordan and John Flanagan, this is an exhilarating debut in an exciting new series.”

—*Book Page*

“Mull’s world-making and character crafting are superb.”

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* [BRANDONMULL.COM](http://BRANDONMULL.COM)

# BEYONDERS

## A WORLD WITHOUT HEROES

◆ BOOK ONE ◆

BRANDON MULL

Aladdin

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

# CONTENTS

Epigraph

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Hippo

Chapter 2: The Loremaster

Chapter 3: The Word

Chapter 4: The Blind King

Chapter 5: Rachel

Chapter 6: Gifts

Chapter 7: Jugard

Chapter 8: Macroid

Chapter 9: Tark

Chapter 10: Ned

Chapter 11: Ferrin

Chapter 12: Jailbreak

Chapter 13: Nicholas

Chapter 14: Questions and Answers

Chapter 15: Chancellor

Chapter 16: Whitelake

Chapter 17: Jasher

Chapter 18: The Sunken Lands

Chapter 19: Pythoness

Chapter 20: The Eternal Feast

Chapter 21: Duel

Chapter 22: Escape

Chapter 23: The Word

Chapter 24: Prisoner

Chapter 25: Deep Portal

Acknowledgments

Reading Guide Questions

## Bonus Scene: Drake's Decision

*Once again, for Mary*



“A single enduring statement can grant  
immortality.”

—Author Unknown

## ❖❖❖❖❖ PROLOGUE ❖❖❖❖❖

The prince dangled in the darkness, shoulders aching, ancient manacles digging into his wrists as he tried to sleep. The chains prevented him from lying down. Whether it was truly light or dark he could not say, for his enemies had stolen his sight.

In the distance he heard screaming—the unrestrained wails of a man trying and failing to escape the deepest agony. The unnerving cries echoed from higher corridors, dampened by intervening barriers.

After untold weeks in the dungeons of Felrook the prince could guess what the man might be feeling. Never had the prince imagined anguish so diverse and exquisite as he had experienced here.

He stood up straight, taking some of the pressure off of his wrists. If they kept him chained here much longer, he felt certain his arms would detach. Then again he preferred his current accommodations to the previous room, where the floor bristled with sharp, rusty spikes, and lying or sitting required bloodshed.

The unseen, wretched prisoner continued to scream. The prince sighed softly. Throughout his tortures, no matter what toxins they had forced down his throat, no matter what questions they had asked, he had not yet uttered a single word. Nor had he cried out in pain. He knew that some of the potions devised by Maldor and his minions had power to loosen his tongue and cloud his judgment, so after he was captured, he had firmly vowed to make no sound.

His captors had hounded him expertly. They had tried to bribe him with food and water. They had tried to compel him with pain. Some had come and spoken to him calmly and reasonably. Others had made harsh demands. At times he had faced several inquisitors in a row. Other times hours or days crawled past between interviews. He could not name the array of toxins administered to him, but no matter how they endeavored to blur his mind and weaken his resolve, the prince had focused on one necessity: silence.

Eventually he would speak. He quietly clung to the hope that he would ultimately be brought before the emperor. Then he would utter a single word.

Vaguely, gradually, the prince began to recognize that his mind felt uncommonly clear. A headache persisted, and hunger gnawed at him, but he found himself capable of directing his thoughts deliberately, an ability he had

taken for granted before all of his food came laced with mind-altering additives. Aside from holding to his governing rule of keeping silent, his thoughts had meandered hazily over the past weeks, and his identity had felt indistinct.

Without warning, the door to his cell creaked open. He tensed, braced for anything. *Keep silent*, he warned himself. *No matter what they do or say.*

“Well, well,” said a warm voice that he had heard before. “You’re looking worse every day.”

The prince said nothing. He heard other men entering the cell. Three besides the speaker.

The friendly voice hardly paused. “If you’re going to host a visitor, we had best get you cleaned up.”

Rough hands unlocked the manacles. The prince felt perplexed. He had never been cleaned since arriving at the dungeon. Perhaps this was a ploy. Or perhaps he might finally enter the presence of the emperor!

Large hands gripped his arms. The hands led him forward, then down to his knees. Coarse rags scrubbed his bare flesh. Before long, unseen hands began trimming his whiskers. Minutes later a straight razor scraped across his cheeks.

A man held him on either side, which gave the prince a good sense for how he might attack them. He could use his legs to take out their knees, then get the razor, and add four corpses to his count. Since his capture, he had already slain six guards.

No. Even if he defeated these guards, without his eyesight he would never escape the dungeon. But he might ruin his chance for an audience with Maldor. The prince shuddered faintly. Some of his best men and closest friends had given their lives, and despite their sacrifices he had failed. His only chance for redemption was to come before the emperor.

“You seem especially docile today,” the warm voice commented. “Could it be you have finally resolved to become a model prisoner?”

Biting retorts sprang to mind. His consciousness had felt muddy for so long, the prince felt tempted to answer. Surely there could be no harm in responding. No, even if his mind felt clear, even if this particular question were innocent, if he broke his pattern of silence, eventually his captors would coerce him into revealing secrets. He only had one word to share, and it would be in the presence of Maldor.

“Ready for a stroll?” the voice asked.

The men on either side helped the prince rise, then escorted him from the cell. He took shuffling steps. As always he wished for his eyes, but he resolutely

reached out with his other senses, noting the direction and temperature of a draft, the acoustics of the corridor, the smells of rot and burning torches.

After some time he heard a door open, and the prince entered a new room. His escorts forced him to his knees—locking him there with shackles on his ankles and wrists—and then placed a heavy iron collar around his neck. Without another word the guards left. Or at least some of them left. One or more could have covertly remained.

Minutes passed. Hours. Finally the cell door opened, and then closed.

“We meet again at last,” a familiar voice said.

Chills raced across the prince’s shoulders. Maldor had visited Trensicourt years ago, trying to negotiate an alliance. As a boy the prince had studied his every move, this man who his father claimed was so dangerous.

“I promised that one day you would kneel to me,” the emperor said, his tone dry.

The prince moved his arms slightly, enough to jangle his chains.

“I would have preferred voluntary reverence,” the emperor admitted. “Perhaps in time. I understand you have lost your tongue.”

The prince hesitated. He had to be sure. He had learned this word of power at great cost. The emperor could not possibly suspect that he knew every syllable. Otherwise he would never have come here in person. But could the speaker be a trick? An imitator? The prince knew he would only get one chance at this.

“I had no interest in addressing your underlings,” the prince said, surprised by how hoarse and weak his voice sounded.

“The heir to Trensicourt speaks?” Maldor exclaimed. “You inhaled a caustic substance. I had begun to suspect you had lost the ability to vocalize. Truly you possess a will of steel. Had I known you merely required my presence, I might have visited you earlier.”

If he was an impersonator, he was a very good one.

“What brings you down to the dungeon?”

The emperor paused. “I am here to celebrate the end of my worries.”

“You have many kingdoms yet to conquer,” the prince protested. “I am one man.”

“And a keystone is a single block,” the emperor murmured, “yet when it is removed, the structure collapses.”

“Others remain,” the prince insisted. “Others will rise.”



“You speak as though you are already gone,” Maldor chuckled. “My friend, I have never meant to kill you. I only needed to prove that you cannot stand against me. The way to confirm this reality was to defeat you. It pains me to see you like this. I would prefer to clothe you in finery and bind up your wounds. You may recall, I have extended my friendship in the past. Not only did you deny me, but you have fought against me, and urged others to do likewise.”

“You will never have my loyalty,” the prince pledged.

“I wish you would be reasonable,” the emperor lamented. “I am fully aware that none of my servants are your equal. You could be my chief lieutenant. I would make you Lord of Trensicourt, and more besides, free to govern as a king in all but name. I could restore your sight, extend your lifespan. You could accomplish much good.”

“And all of Lyrian would fall under your dominion,” the prince replied. “How do I know this is really you? My eyes are gone.”

“Surely you know my voice,” the emperor said, amused.

“Years ago you spoke to me in the parlor at Trensicourt. I showed you a toy.”

“Has this become a game of riddles?”

“Do you remember the toy?”

“A windup carousel with removable horses. You removed an enameled horse—mostly blue, I believe—and asked me to join you.”

The prince nodded in silence. Only the emperor would know that detail. It was too obscure. With hardly a pause he spoke the Word that he had kept secret since his capture. He could taste its power as it escaped his lips, a true Edomic key word.

The prince waited in darkness.

“What a peculiar exclamation,” the emperor remarked.

Dismay and confusion left the prince off balance. That word should have been the emperor’s undoing! Frantically the prince struggled to recall the Word, but uttering it out loud just once had abolished it from memory.

“You look troubled,” Maldor commented knowingly.

“That word should have destroyed you,” the prince whispered, the last of his resolve withering, his inner world dimming into a cold place where only the ashes of hope remained.

The emperor laughed. “Come now, my stalwart prince, surely you did not imagine me ignorant of your quest! We are conversing, in truth, but not in person. I am using an intermediary. After all, being a wizard should include a few advantages! My emissary can speak with my inflections, and we can readily

communicate from afar. But since he is not me, that perilous word can have no effect on either of us. Now that you are divested of your final weapon, why not reconsider my offer?"

"Never," the prince whispered. All he had left was the fact that he had never let the emperor entice him to switch sides. The prince owed that, at least, to all who had believed in him.

"I am very impressed that you learned the Word," the emperor went on. "You are the first. I have long promised myself that he who learned the Word would be invited to join my inner circle. You have no more options. Do not perish without reason. Further resistance will bring no reward. Work with me, and you can still accomplish much good. Respond with care this time, for you will not receive another opportunity. After all, you just tried to kill me. This introduction to the hospitality of my dungeon has been gentle compared to the horrors that await."

Head bowed, the prince remained silent for a moment. After all the planning, the maneuvering, the bold alliances, the narrow escapes, he had failed! He had said the Word to a decoy! He had even anticipated the possibility, but in the end Maldor had fooled him, had ruined him, as happened inevitably to all of his foes. The prince searched inside for hope or faith and found nothing. Perhaps he should accept the inevitable. He was unsure how much longer he could retain his sanity in this unspeakable place.

The prince raised his head. "I will never serve you. You have defeated me, but you will never own me." He owed these words to those who had died for him. He owed the words to himself. To be destroyed was one thing. At least he had not surrendered.

"Very well. You were my finest adversary, this I acknowledge. But you will break here. You know this. You have my admiration, but not my pity." Footsteps retreated, and a door clanged shut with the finality of a tomb.

# THE HIPPO

Over the centuries individuals have crossed from our world to Lyrian in a variety of ways. Although some travelers have journeyed between universes deliberately, normally the sudden voyagers are caught by surprise. They become lost in deep caves and emerge into an unfamiliar landscape. They pass through the natural stone arches that occasionally link our realities. They sink into deep wells, enter passageways near mountaintops, or, less often, crawl through petrified logs. But nobody has ever passed from Earth to Lyrian in a less likely way than Jason Walker.

At the age of thirteen Jason resided in the town of Vista, Colorado. Since his father was enjoying a prosperous career in dentistry, and his older brother had just been accepted to dental school, most of his acquaintances expected Jason would one day become a dentist as well. His parents openly encouraged him in that direction. The expectations had rubbed off, and Jason's vague plan for life included earning a baseball scholarship to a university where he could begin his quest for a dental degree.

He could not recall ever deliberately choosing this course—he had no real passion for tooth repair. The routine struck him as dull and monotonous. Scraping teeth. Taking X-rays. Applying fluoride. Deep down Jason craved something else.

Ever since he could remember, Jason had felt drawn to animals. He read books about them, watched nature programs, and begged for pets. After he consulted with his father, this passion inspired his interest in a zoology major on the way to his dental degree. Unlike many prospective zoology students Jason actually worked in a zoo. Understandably, he had never imagined that his volunteer job might lead him to an alternate universe.

During an unseasonably warm week in late February, Jason leaned against the railing outside the fast-pitch batting cage at the local sports park. Tim stood in the cage, knees slightly bent, chipping a lot of foul balls as he struggled to regain

his timing. Matt, the best hitter on their club team, had gone first, blasting nearly every pitch to the back of the cage with his fluid swing.

“Don’t try to murder the ball,” Jason suggested.

“I’d settle for assault and battery,” Tim grumbled.

On the next pitch Tim crushed a hard ground ball to the left side of the cage. Jason alternated glances between Tim and a labeled image in his biology textbook. He was memorizing the human skeletal system for a test.

“Get your nose out of that book,” Matt murmured to Jason as Tim fouled the next pitch back into the netting.

“I have to head to the zoo after this,” Jason apologized. “I won’t have much time to study today.”

“Trust me,” Matt said, nodding toward their left.

Jason turned his head to find a pair of girls coming toward them. They were April and Holly Knudsen, fraternal twins in his grade at Kennedy Middle School. The girls were not much alike in appearance or interests, especially for twins. Prettier and more studious, April was in three of Jason’s honors classes, including biology. Louder and sportier, Holly held a softball bat in one hand and a batting helmet in the other.

Only two girls at school made Jason feel queasy and self-conscious: Jen Miller and April Knudsen. They were pretty, and smart, and seemed down-to-earth. Jason harbored secret crushes on both of them.

“Hey, guys,” Holly called.

Jason tried to smile. He was suddenly very aware of the textbook in his hands. Would it make him look like a nerd, reading a biology book at the batting cages?

Matt said nothing. He seldom spoke much around girls. Jason tried to make his voice casual. “Hi, Holly. April.”

“Getting ready for your last season before high school ball?” Holly wondered.

Tim whacked a hard fly ball.

“Coach Thayer is already scouting Jason,” Matt said. “He might end up pitching for varsity as a freshman.”

It was true. Jason had hit a growth spurt at the end of sixth grade. His hitting had initially fallen apart as he’d adjusted to his height, while his pitching had started to gain some real speed. He now stood almost six feet tall. His hitting was recuperating, and his fastball was up into the eighties, but his control had suffered.



“Wow, freshmen boys almost never play varsity,” Holly admired. “They almost took state last year.”

“I’m not sure how much I impressed Thayer,” Jason confessed. “My pitches were all over the place.”

“Only one guy on next year’s high school team throws faster than you,” Matt said. “When you throw your best stuff, I can’t hit you.”

“I tense up lately,” Jason admitted with a grimace. Over the past year, during games, he had started to feel very self-conscious, and erratic pitches had been the result. He had blown some games by giving up too many walks, and he’d lost a key game with a wild pitch. He had also hit a few batters, and at the speeds he was throwing, that was a big deal. No opposing batters had been seriously hurt, but they could have been.

At first Jason had assumed the increased speed of his pitches had caused the problem. But then Matt and Tim had begun to notice that he routinely threw better during informal games or practices. It bothered Jason to think that he had lost games because he lacked the guts to throw well under pressure. Maybe the problem came from dwelling on how much others expected from him. Maybe he was expecting too much from himself, fixating on perfection. Or maybe his skills were simply fading.

His friends on the team expected him to overcome his control issues and carry them to glory. But he was not yet the star others expected him to become. He sometimes wished his friends would brag about him a little less.

April pointed at Jason’s textbook. “Are you getting ready for the bio test?”

“I’m trying,” Jason replied.

“What’s the name of your cheekbone?” she quizzed.

He resisted a grin. “The zygomatic arch.”

April raised her eyebrows. “Not bad.”

Holly rolled her eyes. “You guys are such geeks.”

“Geeks rule the world,” Jason countered.

Holly grabbed her sister. “We better get over to the softball cage.”

Jason wanted to ask them to grab a snack or something. Well, specifically, he wanted to ask April, but asking both of them would be less intimidating. They were two girls; he was with two other guys—it would just be a small group hanging out. There would never be a more perfect moment to casually approach April. Who knew, they might end up with a study date for the biology test.

But he couldn’t make his lips move in time. The twins were walking away.

“Hey,” Jason called, feeling awkward, squeezing his biology book. “Do you guys want to grab some food when you’re done?”

Still moving away, Holly pushed her hair back over her ear as she apologized. “We can’t. We have to go to our uncle’s birthday party. Maybe some other time.”

“Okay, that’s cool,” Jason said, even though nothing about it was remotely cool.

Behind him Tim exited the batting cage. “You like April?” Tim asked.

Jason winced, stealing a glance over his shoulder. Was he that obvious? “Not so loud. A little, I guess.”

“I think Holly seems more fun,” Matt mused.

Tim tossed Jason the batting helmet. “You’re up. Here’s your chance for back-to-back strikeouts.”

“You’re a riot,” Jason said, sliding on the slightly oversized helmet. A red light glowed near the pitching machine. Jason adjusted the strap on his batting glove, grabbed his bat, entered the cage, and took several practice chops, overswinging at first, then settling into his regular stroke.

“You ready?” Matt asked.

“Go for it.”

The light turned green. Jason crouched into his batting stance, bouncing a little, anticipating the first pitch, trying to ignore the possibility that April was watching. He tended to swing late on the first ball. It hissed out of the pitching machine and blurred past him. He swung way too late.

“He’s a lover, not a hitter,” Tim kidded.

Jason focused. The next ball zipped out of the machine. His timing was right, but he swung too low, and the ball skipped up and back off the bat.

On the third pitch he made a solid connection. The ball rocketed to the rear of the cage, a high line drive.

Matt whistled. “Not bad.”

Jason glanced back at his friends, grinning. Shifting his gaze, he noticed that April was watching her sister enter the fast-pitch softball cage. When he turned to face forward, a ball was streaking toward him. Jason twisted his head just in time to prevent it from striking his face, but the hard sphere thumped against the side of his helmet, knocking it off his head and sending him sprawling.

Artificial turf prickled against his cheek as Jason tried to fathom what had happened. Suddenly Tim and Matt were at his side, asking if he was all right.

"I'm fine," he muttered, standing up and swaying into Tim, who steadied him.

"You're out of it," Matt warned. "You got tagged hard."

"I'm just a little rattled," Jason protested, shaking Tim off and heading out of the cage. The ground seemed to be teetering, as if he were balancing at the center of a seesaw. "I just need to sit down."

Jason plopped onto the bench outside the cage and put his head in his hands. "I should have warned you," Tim said. "Some of those balls were coming inside for me too. Somebody needs to recalibrate that thing."

"It isn't your fault. I wasn't paying attention. Just bad luck." He put his face in his hands and massaged the sides of his forehead.

"Maybe we should get you to a doctor," Matt suggested.

"No, I'm good. It just shook me up a little. Take some swings; I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Go avenge me. Knock the covers off some balls."

Jason concentrated on his breathing, trying to ignore the clanging of aluminum bats. He began to feel more centered. He made eye contact with April, who squinted sympathetically. By the time Matt left the cage, Jason could stand without the ground tilting much.

"I want to snag some grub before I hit the zoo," Jason said.

"Sorry, I'm supposed to meet up with my cousins," Matt said. "I'll already be a little late."

Tim checked his wristwatch. "I can't go either. You would have been on your own with the twins. My brother is picking me up in about five minutes. We could give you a lift."

"I have my bike. I'll catch you guys later."

Tim and Matt returned the helmets to the counter, while Jason went to the parking lot and claimed his bicycle from the rack. A string of warmish days had melted the snow, even most of the roadside drifts, leaving the streets unseasonably welcoming to cyclists. Although the sky was currently overcast, the temperature remained much too warm for snow. If anything it might rain.

As Jason pedaled up the hill to Anderson's grocery store, his head began to ache, and he started to feel unbalanced. Rather than push through the discomfort, he opted to walk his bike the rest of the way.

Leaving his bike chained near a soda machine, Jason entered through the automatic door and went to the Chinese food counter off to one side. He ordered the lunch special, and the guy behind the counter spooned orange

chicken, beef and broccoli, and chow mein onto a compartmentalized Styrofoam plate. The broccoli was a bright, fluorescent green—a color that would seldom occur in nature. The broccoli always looked that color here, as if it were spray-painted or made of plastic.

After finding a seat at a little table near the deli, Jason started eating. The orange chicken mixed with the chow mein was his favorite, but he only made it through half the food before he began to feel nauseated. He took a long sip of water and rubbed his temples. Then he unwrapped the fortune cookie, cracked it open, and removed the slip of paper. *New experiences await on the horizon.*

They should be a little bolder, he thought, and assert something like, “You are about to suffer from violent food poisoning.”

Jason headed outside. As he biked farther up the hill, traversing a few crosswalks, his head felt clearer, although a dull ache persisted, pounding a bit as climbing the slope elevated his heart rate. Before long he reached the Vista Point Zoo parking lot. Although the family-owned institution was no match for the Denver Zoo, Vista Point housed a respectable population, with more than four hundred animals representing almost one hundred and sixty species. Typical for an afternoon in winter, the lot was mostly empty.

At his locker Jason pulled on a set of gray coveralls and replaced his shoes with work boots. He was a few minutes early, so he thumbed through his biology textbook. The words seemed a little fuzzy. Closing his eyes periodically, he recited the names of various bones and processes.

Glancing up, Jason noticed the clock. Time to clean the hippo structure.

When he entered the hippo viewing area, Jason paused to admire a glass case on the wall labeled: MONUMENT TO HUMAN STUPIDITY.

It contained various items workers had fished out of the hippo tank over the years: aluminum cans, glass bottles, coins, cigar stubs, two cigarette lighters, a dental-floss dispenser, a pocket knife, a tangled Slinky, a plastic wristwatch, a disposable razor—even a few rounds of ammunition.

Pacing behind his push broom, Jason watched debris accumulate in front of the dark bristles, wondering how some idiot could top the random dangerous items in the display case. Maybe by chucking in a lawn mower. Or a few bars of uranium.

Jason paused to stare over the railing at the enormous hippo resting motionless below the water on the floor of the tank. Hank was the only hippo in the zoo, an adult male with his fortieth birthday coming up in the summer.



Jason shook his head. The majestic hippopotamus—hard at work as usual. They might as well replace it with a statue. No visitor would know the difference.

Faintly, on the edge of perception, Jason heard tinkling music rising from the water. Head slightly cocked, he wandered around the area trying to pinpoint the true origin of the sound. As the volume of the music increased, growing richer and clearer to where he could discern different instruments, he returned to the water and had to admit that the melodic strains seemed to emanate from the submerged hippo.

Had they installed underwater speakers in the tank without his knowledge? Some new technique for soothing the obese mammal? Perhaps it was a pathetic attempt to give the hippo more crowd appeal.

The melody was unfamiliar, supported by harmonies and complemented by interweaving countermelodies. A deep, gentle percussion kept time. Jason leaned over the rail, perplexed by the bizarre phenomenon. He wished another person were present so he could verify that he wasn't having an auditory hallucination.

The hippo stirred, vast mouth momentarily yawning open, and for that instant the music became much louder and more distinct, as if the hippo truly were the source of the elaborate tune. Then the great mouth clamped shut.

The music became muffled again when the mouth closed, but continued to gradually increase in volume. Could the hippo have swallowed a stereo? That was the only plausible explanation, but it seemed just as ludicrous as the idea that the hippo was spontaneously producing the sound.

Maybe there was no music. Maybe he had been thumped on the head more severely than he'd realized. But his mind felt clearer than it had earlier, and the unsteadiness was fading.

Scanning the area, Jason saw no other people around. Would there be time to run and fetch someone else? He thought of the Warner Bros. cartoon about the singing and dancing frog that clammed up whenever witnesses were present.

Leaning his stomach against the top of the railing, Jason teetered far over the metal bar, baffled by the beckoning melody. If he could get an ear closer to the water, he could confirm whether the music was really coming from down there. The hippo remained motionless.

As his ear descended toward the rippling surface, a powerful sensation of vertigo swept over him. Jason overbalanced, lost his grip, and plunged head foremost into the pool above the massive hippo. As if this were the chance for which the lethargic beast had waited its entire captive existence, the

hippopotamus surged upward with jaws agape, the music chiming louder than ever.

Before Jason could react, his hands were grasping at a slimy tongue, and his face was sliding against a greasy surface. Sprawled on his belly, he raced along a dark, slippery tunnel. No creature was this big! What was happening? In counterpoint to his distress, melodic music rang clearly as he sloshed along the humid corridor. He tried to brace himself against the rubbery sides to slow his slide but failed, until his arms and head suddenly emerged from an opening in the side of a dying tree, near a river lined with ferny vegetation.

Night had inexplicably fallen. A silver path of moonlight trembled on the water. The music he had heard was coming from a wide raft drifting on the lazy current. He squirmed out of the gap, his coveralls drenched from the plunge into the hippo tank, and turned around to inspect the hollow inside of the tree. The inner walls felt moist and rotten. He could locate no opening save the one through which he had emerged and an aperture directly overhead, at the top of the hollow trunk, through which he could see stars.

This was impossible! Where was the tunnel? How had it led to this tree? Where was the hippo? Where was the zoo? There was no river half this wide in his whole town! Jason blinked, wondering if the blow to his head at the batting cage had knocked him out.

Bracing himself against the interior walls of the trunk, he managed to scramble up until he came out at the top, twelve feet above the ground. Still no sign of a hippopotamus or of the Vista Point Zoo. He did, however, command a clear view of the raft, which had drawn up even with his current location.

Small colored lanterns illuminated the vessel. A narrow man in a pale outfit hammered at a xylophone. A stocky woman blew on a curved flute. Another man alternated between racks of chimes and a tall set of bongos. A flabby woman with at least five chins plucked a strangely shaped stringed instrument. A short figure held an enormous brass horn with tubing that snaked around his broad chest and rested on his shoulders.

The raft swept behind a screen of weeping willows before Jason could apprehend more details, though a few other musicians tinkered with a variety of less discernable instruments. The haunting music permeated the air, floating to him across river and riverbank.

Jason's head swam with questions. How had he gotten here? Why was it nighttime? How would he get back to the zoo? Falling into the hippo tank was one thing—careless but possible. Passing through the mouth of a hippopotamus

into a tunnel slide and coming out of a hollow tree beside a river was tougher to process. Everything he had ever assumed about reality had just been turned inside out. But his surroundings seemed so tangible. There was no denying his senses. He felt the damp, splintery texture of the bark beneath his hands; he smelled the faint odor of decay rising from a standing pool at the river's edge. Oily sap clung to his skin. He sniffed his palm, and the pungent resin reminded him faintly of Fig Newtons and black licorice, but he had never smelled anything quite like it.

Jason sighed. He knew the difference between the vague impressions of a dream and the sharper sensations of wakeful consciousness. He certainly felt awake. Yet he could not help doubting the unreal situation. Perhaps this was simply a vivid dream. After all, a baseball had bashed him in the head. He could still be lying unconscious in the batting cage. Then he shivered. Maybe he had died—there could have been a clot in his brain. Or maybe the hippo really had eaten him. Could he have crossed over to some sort of afterlife?

He scratched his chin. The sensation felt genuine. His wet clothes clung authentically. His head throbbed gently, and he remained mildly dizzy. Would the symptoms of a concussion persist in a dream? In the afterlife? He listened to the music and the gentle lapping sounds of the river. Wherever he was, whatever the explanation, he remained alert, and he was immersed in a vivid, perceivable environment. He surveyed the vicinity—the mossy trees along the river, the shrubs below, the insects buzzing nearby—mildly astonished at how acceptable the impossible became once it had transpired.

Jason promptly discovered that his immediate problem would be getting down. He sat awkwardly on the lip of the tall hollow trunk, trying to position himself so he could descend as he had climbed. He couldn't seem to get it right, and he began to experience light-headedness at the thought of sliding down the interior of the trunk, accumulating splinters, before breaking an ankle at the bottom. Attempting to climb down the exterior of the tree appeared even less inviting. Why was climbing up always so much easier than climbing down?

Finally, after many hesitant twistings and turnings, he lowered himself back into the trunk in a position where he could brace himself. Once he had squirmed down to the bottom, Jason exited the hollow tree, glad for the moonlight, and decided to follow the raft, since it represented the only trace of civilization.

Shortly he came abreast with the music, though foliage along the riverbank hindered his view of the vessel. Jason trotted ahead until he found a gap, and he

discovered a little hunched figure squatting on a log.

“Hello,” Jason said.

A head whipped around. The face belonged to a kid, maybe ten or eleven. As the boy shifted, Jason realized he had a sizable hump on his back. “Why are you sneaking up on me?” the boy snapped.

“I’m just following the raft,” Jason replied defensively.

Looking calmer, the boy scooted over on the log to make room. Jason took a seat.

“What’s with the musical raft, anyhow?” Jason asked.

The boy turned a skeptical eye. “You joking? That’s the funeral dirge of the Giddy Nine, the best musicians around. Most folks are waiting for them down by the falls. That’s the only part they care about. But I like to hear the music. It’ll be the last time.”

“They’re headed for a waterfall?” Now that he listened for it, Jason could hear the distant roar.

The boy nodded gravely. “They’re trying to make some kind of statement. They were banned from playing together in public. I don’t see how this solves anything.” He gave Jason a hard stare. “You must have heard of them. Right?”

“No. I’m a stranger here. Just arrived.”

“Where are you from?”

“Vista, Colorado.”

“Never heard of it.”

Jason hesitated, unsure whether he wanted to hear how the boy answered. “How about America? Or the planet Earth?”

The boy scrunched his face. “Not really.”

“Can you tell me where I am?”

“The riverbank, obviously.” He returned his gaze to the river with a start. “They’ve passed us by. We’d better move on or we’ll miss the finale.”

Jason tromped along behind the boy, who moved surprisingly fast along a good route that skirted several marshy areas and shadowy thickets. The night air seemed to help his head, although a faint pulsing ache persisted.

They climbed a steep rise crowded with vegetation and came out on an overlook high above the river. The falls boomed louder. From the elevated viewpoint Jason peered upriver to see they were now well ahead of the little craft. The music sounded far away. Looking in the other direction, he could see where the river seemed to abruptly end. The falls.

“We’d better keep moving,” the young boy urged. “We’re ahead of them now, but the river picks up. Soon they’ll be traveling much faster than we can.”

Jason followed the boy down the rise, back under the gloom of overhanging branches. Soon he could hear the water flowing more swiftly. The roar of the falls grew to a constant thunder, drowning out the distant music. Jason found himself short of breath as he hustled to match the increasing pace of his guide.

They came through a dense stand of trees and beheld a moon-silhouetted multitude congregated beside the top of the waterfall. At the very brink of the falls sat a few tiers of makeshift bleachers crammed with spectators. “Find a good spot,” the boy advised before scampering over to the riverbank.

Jason jogged over to the far side of the bleachers, discovering that they came right up to the edge of the dizzying precipice, over which the water tumbled like an endless tsunami. He had been to Niagara Falls once with his family—this looked almost as high with nearly as much water. Cool vapor misted his face.

Jason walked back around the bleachers to the riverbank. People lined the bank upriver from the bleachers for some distance. Some of them looked somber. Others munched on snacks. One group swayed as they tunelessly sang an unintelligible song. Jason moved upriver in search of an open spot. The majority of the people wore simple, homespun clothing, though occasionally he saw a sleek fur coat or embroidered vest. Nobody wore what he considered normal, modern attire.

After jostling forward a little, he found a space that would offer a good view of the craft flowing off the brink, although too far upstream to observe the downward plunge. He stood beside a middle-aged woman wearing a floral bonnet and a dress fashioned from heavy material. She stared anxiously up the river, wringing her hands.

“Can you believe this?” he said.

She turned to him. Her rather wide-set eyes came to his chin. “Can I believe that my brother is about to kill himself to create a ridiculous spectacle?”

Jason’s eyebrows shot up. “Your brother is on that raft?”

“He never had any sense. Or any backbone. He obeys whatever Simeon tells him. That madman has convinced the whole group to throw their lives away.”

She gazed back at the rushing water. The raft was still not in sight.

“Why are you here watching?” Jason asked.

She shrugged, her cheeks coloring slightly. “To show support. The Giddy Nine believe this sacrifice is important. I suppose that whatever happens, it’s better for Darren to leave this world feeling appreciated.”

“Is that what brought all of these people?”

She looked down the line toward the improvised bleachers at the brink of the falls. “These are mostly admirers of their music. Nobody gets what this is really about. I imagine many are here simply because it sounds like great fun to watch a raft full of musicians plummet off an enormous waterfall.”

Jason inwardly conceded that it would be an impressive sight. But at what cost! The waterfall was much too high for any of the musicians to survive.

“I wish there were something I could do,” the woman fretted.

“Why doesn’t somebody try to save them?” Jason asked.

“They don’t want to be saved. This is a funeral.”

Jason looked around. People stared expectantly upriver, some gloomy, some eager.

Should he try to rescue the musicians? It seemed like a tragic waste of lives. If he were out there, no matter what his convictions, he figured he would be changing his mind about going over the falls as soon as he got beyond the point of no return. What sane people would willingly drift off a tremendous waterfall? What sort of useful statement could that possibly make? From what he had been told, it sounded like the others were following the orders of one crazy leader. What if he had brainwashed them, like with a cult? Most of the people on the raft would probably rejoice to be rescued.

“I want to help you,” Jason said in a low voice. “Do you know where I could find some rope?”

The woman glanced at him, hope flickering in her gaze. “You want to stop this? The rescue squad has a rope. Don’t count on them using it.”

“Rescue squad? Where?”

“They’re just a precaution. They’re not far upriver.”

Some in the crowd began to cheer. The raft had come into view. At the very limits of perception Jason heard the music playing.

Leaving behind the group of spectators, Jason took off up the riverbank at a full sprint until he encountered a pair of men. They had a long line secured around the thick trunk of a knobby tree that towered over the rushing water.

“Are you the rescue squad?” Jason asked.

The short man with one arm answered. “Aye.”

“Do you intend to rescue them?” The musicians were approaching rapidly on the swift current. Their instruments screeched and hiccupped as the raft pitched on the foamy water.

“Only if they call for assistance,” the short man affirmed.



Jason saw that the other end of the slender line was affixed to an arrow held by a slim man leaning on a longbow. The three of them stood approximately fifty yards upriver from the falls. The raft was racing along about twenty yards from the bank.

“Will your arrow reach, carrying that rope?” Jason asked.

“Certainly, long as I aim a little high,” the lean man replied.

“You a good shot?”

“None better.”

“Maybe you should just save them. I bet they’ll end up thanking you.”

“Doubtful,” the lean man sniffed. “They didn’t even want rescuers present. I’ll interfere only at their request.”

Jason turned to face the imperiled musicians. If he tried to swim the rope out to them, he would be swept away downstream before he got close. The tree did not overhang the river far enough to climb out to them. Time was running short.

“Try to save them,” Jason insisted. “This is wrong.”

“Not unless—,” the short man began.

“I hear them calling for help,” Jason lied.

“Go away,” demanded the lean man, his wide lips peeling back to reveal yellowed teeth. “The last thing we need is interference from some desperate, aspiring hero. If they really did cry for help, we wouldn’t hear it over your racket.”

“The sister of one of the musicians sent me,” Jason tried.

“I don’t care if the king of Meridon sent you,” the lean man said. “This is their decision.”

The raft would soon draw even with them. There was no time to think. Jason shoved the short man. Caught by surprise, he stumbled back over the steep bank and into the river.

“What’s wrong with you?” shouted the lean man, dropping both bow and arrow to dive into the torrent after his fellow rescuer. The one-armed man had already washed some distance downstream and could be seen flailing lopsidedly. Even immediately beside the bank the current ran strong.

Trusting the lean man to rescue his comrade, Jason wasted no time collecting the fallen bow and arrow. He nocked the arrow and pulled it to his cheek, straining against the heavy tension of the string, one eye squinted shut. He hadn’t handled a bow since earning an archery badge at a summer camp two years ago.

The raft heaved along, twenty yards out, now exactly perpendicular to his position on the bank. Many of the instruments and musicians appeared lashed in place. He tilted the bow upward, hoping he and the lean man understood “a little high” to mean the same thing.

He released the arrow, and it streaked across the distance to the raft, ending its flight embedded in the shoulder of the man playing the bongos. The percussion stopped as the man sank out of sight. The line on the bank continued to uncoil, paying out as the raft progressed rapidly forward.

Jason gasped. Had that really just happened? Shooting somebody had not been part of the plan. He eyed the uncoiling lifeline. Was it too long? It looked pretty thin. Would it hold?

The line pulled taut with a sudden jerk. The raft lurched in response, sending up a spray of water as it swung toward the riverbank. The crowd cried out in astonishment.

Thirty yards downriver the lean man hauled the short man out of the water. The lean man stood watching the raft arc toward the bank, hands on his hips. Something in one hand glinted in the bright moonlight.

Whether or not the musicians wanted to be saved, the raft was going to collide with the bank. The wounded percussionist must have become firmly entangled with some of the equipment, because the strain on the line was extraordinary. Most of the musicians continued to play. A couple of them seemed to be attempting to free themselves from their lashings.

When the raft crashed against the sheer bank ten yards shy of the falls, buckling somewhat, many of the spectators groaned. But moans turned to exclamations as the impact launched the stocky woman overboard along with her curved flute. The ruckus reached a climax as she washed over the brink and down the thunderous cascade.

Jason’s eyes widened in horror, and he felt the bile rise up in his throat, barely able to believe what he had just witnessed. All around him cheering broke out, as the lean man slashed the taut line, and the crippled raft once again surged ahead with the current. Jason thought one person might have jumped from the raft to the bank, but he could not be certain. The uproar from the crowd reached a jubilant crescendo as the raft sailed over the falls directly below the packed bleachers, vanishing with a cymbal crash and a final squeaky note from a woodwind instrument.

Jason stood frozen, feeling like he had been kicked in the stomach. None of those people could have survived!

Knife still in hand, the lean man and his waterlogged colleague were swiftly returning up the riverbank. Jason shook himself out of his paralyzed shock and hurriedly retreated back into the trees away from the river.

# THE LOREMASTER

After crashing recklessly through varying densities of foliage for some time, Jason paused, legs tired. In a crouch he listened intently, his head throbbing with every heartbeat. Either he was not being followed, or his pursuers moved like ninjas. To be safe he ran on, until a stitch in his side and an extreme shortness of breath finally forced him to stop. Doubled over with his hands on his knees, Jason still couldn't hear any evidence of pursuit.

He sat on the ground with his back propped against the rough bole of a tree, panting quietly. In what kind of place would anyone applaud as people floated off a deadly waterfall? Had he really just shot a man with an arrow?

Closing his eyes, Jason rested his face in his palms and tried to will himself awake. With his eyes shut he could be anywhere. Unconscious in a hospital bed. Senseless on the artificial turf of the batting cage. Except he still felt the tree at his back, still heard the insects chirping.

The percussionist had been heading toward certain death off a gigantic waterfall. Did it really matter if an arrow lodged in his shoulder a few seconds before the suicidal plunge? Jason gritted his teeth. Through lack of skill he had aimed too low. That didn't make him a criminal, did it? Just a failure as a rescuer. After all, he had been trying to assist people who were already doomed. Right?

The real criminal had been the jerk who cut the line. Jason could hardly believe the man from the rescue squad had felt comfortable cutting loose all of those people. He had basically killed them.

Jason's hands trembled. The night was growing colder, and his damp coveralls magnified the chill. He slapped his cheek. He pinched his arm. The sensations felt genuine.

Tired of sitting and shivering, he got up and continued tramping away from the river. The churning of the falls slowly diminished to a hiss.

The ground sloped generally upward. He kept watch for shelter. In the dimness of the woods, time passed at a crawl. After an hour or two, with his

coveralls feeling a trifle less damp and the long walk leaving him exhausted, he settled for squirming beneath a thick bush. It smelled a little like the tree-shaped air freshener in his dad's car. He could no longer hear the falls.

Resting his head on folded arms, Jason clenched his jaw to stop his teeth from chattering. He found that by scooping leaves around himself, curling up, and holding still, he eventually felt a little warmer.

Could he really have crossed over to some other reality? The thought made him shiver. How would he get home? He had seen no evidence of a way back at the tree where he had emerged. No shimmering portal to his home dimension. Where would he begin to look for a way back? What if there was no way back? Had this ever happened to anyone before?

Jason pulled out his cell phone. The glow of the display illuminated the dark bush. Apparently, the phone had survived the wetness of the hippo tank. He was unsurprised to find the phone could not get service. There would be no dialing home. He had one unopened text message. It would be from his mom, probably reprimanding him. He opened the message.

*Please answer your phone. Even if you choose to disrespect my opinions, I still love you.*

Tears sprang to his eyes. She had it wrong! He just didn't want her trying to control his study schedule.

Earlier today he had let slip that he had a biology test coming up, along with an English project. His mom and dad knew little about his study habits, largely because he routinely brought home really good grades, so they didn't have much to worry about. But every now and then, seemingly at random, his mom decided to play at parenting. She had told him he shouldn't go to the batting cages if he had homework to do. He tried to explain that he had a plan for getting everything done, but she had insisted firmly. So he had just left, biking to the batting cages despite her protests, heedless of the punishments that might follow.

Why was he so stubborn? She had tried to call him, and he hadn't picked up. Would that be how she remembered him? An ungrateful, disobedient jerk? His insides seemed to shrink at the thought. Would this brief message be the last he ever heard from his family?

Jason felt the frustration and fear well up inside him, and his hands involuntarily clenched into fists. He gazed around at the empty forest, wanting

to scream, to hit something. How could he really be stuck here, in the middle of this insane place, so far from everyone he knew?

Jason thought about his dog, Shadow, a three-year-old Labrador. Who would feed him? Walk him? Who would throw around one of the tattered old tennis balls with him? His parents had never wanted a dog. To get him, Jason had promised to take responsibility for all of his needs. Jason had trained him, and had paid for the sofa he chewed up by mowing lawns and washing cars. Jason devoutly cleaned up after Shadow, bathed him, played with him, and roamed the woods with him. He doubted whether his parents knew how much Shadow ate, where he liked to be scratched, or even where to find his leash. If Jason never found his way home, Shadow might suffer more than anyone!

“Hello!” he called out, knowing it was pointless. “I want to go home! Hello! Hello?” He blinked back his tears, trying to get his emotions under control. None of this made any sense, but he had to calm down; he had to figure this out if he ever wanted to see his friends again, his parents, his family.

After taking a deep breath, Jason scrolled through his other messages. There were only five. Four of them were brief, stupid exchanges with Matt. One was from Tim, inviting him to the batting cages. Jason was pretty good about deleting his messages. Now he wished he had more to read. The battery was running low, so he read the message from his mom one last time and then shut off the phone.

Jason closed his eyes. He needed to rest. Hopefully, a new day and a refreshed brain would give him a better perspective.

Back home when he couldn't sleep, he would lie in bed waiting for patterns to appear on the glowing face of his digital clock, including such exciting milestones as 11:11, 11:22, 11:24, 12:12 , 12:21, and his personal favorites, 12:34 and 12:48. Here he listened to night sounds: the sporadic hooting of owls, the occasional fluttering of wings or rustling of leaves, the scraping and squeaking of insects. He shifted around, trying to get comfortable. Just when he was beginning to worry he would never fall asleep . . .

. . . he awoke with sunlight filtering through the trees. He blinked, his head swirling with confusion at his surroundings. Immediately all of the events of the day before rushed back to him, and a heavy weight pressed down on his chest. He had secretly hoped to awaken in a hospital bed back in Vista. Could people fall asleep in a dream, then reawaken with the dream still in progress?

Jason sat up, noticing that his coveralls remained slightly damp. In the light of day he could see that some of the surrounding trees wore a rich purple moss

sprinkled with tiny white flowers. A nearby shrub had long, corkscrewing leaves. The clues were subtle, but he was definitely nowhere near Vista, Colorado. An innate sense screamed that he was far from his home, far from his proper place. In fact, judging from the clothes the people at the waterfall had been wearing, he might not even be in his proper time.

Stiff muscles protested as Jason stood. He rubbed at his side where a rock had jabbed him all night. A muscle behind his right shoulder felt particularly sore. He realized it was probably the result of hauling back that bowstring the night before.

Jason sighed. With the surrounding trees obscuring his view, he had little sense of direction. A tiny yellow bird with black markings twittered on a branch. A small fan of feathers frilled the back of its head. More than most people, Jason had always paid particular attention to animals, but this was not a species he recognized.

Hands on his hips, Jason weighed his options. Wherever he was, dying of exposure in the wilderness seemed like a real possibility if he didn't take action. Considering all the people he had seen at the waterfall, he concluded that there must be a town in the vicinity.

With a gnawing hunger growing, he struck off toward the rising sun. He soon came upon a brook narrow enough to jump across. He figured if he wanted, he could follow the brook downstream to the river. The crowd should have dispersed by now.

He crouched beside a place where the water splashed off a little stone shelf. The water looked clean, but he resisted the urge to drink, in case it would make him sick.

He decided to follow the brook. Then if he started dying of thirst, he could always risk waterborne bacteria in order to preserve his life. But he would head upstream first, since the river had been bad luck.

Jason did not travel far before arriving at a pool from which the brook originated. Surveying the area, he was startled to spot a huge building through the trees, constructed entirely of speckled granite. A frieze depicting men at war surrounded the top of the building—foot soldiers armed with spears and shields confronted armored warriors in chariots. Windowless walls of snugly joined blocks hid behind numerous grooved columns. A series of broad stone steps flanked by massive stone figures granted access to a brass door recessed in an arched alcove. The overall effect was that of a fancy museum. Except that the



immense structure stood in the middle of a forest without a discernible road or path to grant access.

Relieved to find evidence of civilization, Jason hurried up the stone steps. He hesitated at the door. Maybe it was a huge tomb. The thought froze him momentarily. Did he really want to enter a mausoleum in the middle of nowhere?

He grasped the brass handle and tugged the heavy door, relieved to find it unlocked, because who would leave a tomb unlocked? He pulled it open wide.

An old man wearing a purple hat shaped like a limp mushroom looked up from a great wooden desk as Jason came through the door. A large pair of wire-rimmed spectacles rested on his bony nose, the lenses segmented into bifocals. He tilted his head back and stared at Jason with magnified irises. The skin below his eyes drooped in curved seams.

“Great Mother of Knowledge,” the man whispered.

“Hello,” Jason said, relieved to have found an actual, nonfurious person.

The man arose and came around the desk. His purple knickers matched his hat and ballooned at the thighs. Bright buckles gleamed on his shoes.

“Welcome, Seeker of Knowledge,” he intoned importantly. “Surely you have traveled far and endured much hardship to earn the right to study at the Repository of Learning. Few have the courage to come here, or the skill to find this remarkable edifice.”

“I’m from far away, I guess. I’m definitely glad to see you.”

The old man rubbed his hands together. “You are the first valiant adventurer in a decade to win through to these hallowed corridors of enlightenment. Truly, you must be an explorer driven by a profound appetite for knowledge. I have been too long without new companionship. Pray, regale me with tales of your journey.”

Jason blinked and scratched his cheek awkwardly. “You never get visitors? I just saw a bunch of people at the waterfall not far from here.”

The old man scowled thoughtfully. “Locals rarely come as close to the repository as the falls. There must have been some special occasion.”

Jason was not eager to recount his accident with the raft. “I guess. You said you wanted my story? Well, I was swallowed by a hippopotamus. Except I didn’t go into the hippo. I ended up in a tree. Then I sort of wandered here.”

The eyes behind the spectacles narrowed. “You choose to speak in riddles. Very well, you have earned the right to be cryptic. I am the loremaster Bridonus

Keplin Dunscrip Garonicum the Ninth. I am custodian of the knowledge hoarded here. How may I be of service?"

Jason regarded the old man thoughtfully. "Nobody has come here in a decade?"

"You are the first in ten years."

"What do you do all day?"

He cocked his head. "I manage the records. I tend the lore. Every volume is catalogued in my mind." He tapped a long finger against his temple.

"So you're a librarian."

His eyes shifted back and forth. "I prefer loremaster."

"Look, my name is Jason, and I stumbled across this place by accident, although it sounds like some people go out of their way to find it. I can see why it takes them a while, since you're located in the middle of nowhere. Can you tell me where I am?"

The loremaster seemed at a loss. "You are in the Repository of Learning," he explained hesitantly.

"No. I mean in general. This world. Does it have a name?"

The loremaster leaned forward, eyebrows twitching upward. "This world?"

"Have you ever heard of Colorado?"

"I have not."

"But you speak English."

"Naturally. Most speak the common tongue."

"Do you know where English comes from?"

"From the Beyond. You ask suspicious questions, traveler."

"Do I?" Jason chuckled. "You would too, in my shoes. As far as I know, you're a hallucination, part of a crazy dream that won't quit."

"I see," the loremaster said. "You are a philosopher."

"No, I came out of my world somehow. I ended up in these woods. I'm from the same place as English."

The loremaster's expression became guarded. "A Beyonder?"

"Maybe, if you say English comes from the Beyond. Do people often visit from my world?"

"Not any longer," the loremaster replied skeptically.

"Do you know how I can get back?"

The loremaster gave Jason a sad smile. "Say no more. Did you journey to this sanctuary simply to mock me? Who put you up to this? My son, perhaps?"

"You think I'm kidding?"

The loremaster placed his fists on his hips. “You would like me to believe that the first Beyonder to visit Lyrian in many decades happened to wander into the Repository of Learning? I may be notoriously gullible, young traveler, but even I have limits.”

Jason raised his hands to his forehead. “I don’t believe this. You seem like someone who could help me if you believed me.”

The loremaster’s smile warmed, as if enjoying the absurdity that Jason was remaining in character after having been unmasked. “Enough nonsense. Surely you came here for more than a prank?”

“The name of this world is Lyrian?”

The exasperated loremaster made no response.

“Where is the nearest town?”

The loremaster removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “As you well know, there is no settlement in the immediate area. The nearest town is two days east of here.”

“Then why were dozens of people watching musicians float off a nearby waterfall?”

“I seldom concern myself with local events beyond these walls.”

Jason dug in his pocket and pulled out his keys. A small laser pointer dangled from the key chain. Pressing a button, he shone a red dot onto the wall. “Ever seen a laser pointer?”

“What a curious instrument,” the loremaster remarked, genuine interest returning to his voice.

Jason pulled up the blue pant leg of his coveralls. “Look at my boot. Based on what I noticed people wearing at the waterfall, you’ve never seen shoes like these.”

The loremaster leaned down, squinting. “Most uncommon workmanship.”

Jason patted his pockets. “I left most of my things in my locker. But I’m guessing my outfit isn’t typical either.”

“Agreed.”

“Well, I’ve never seen a hat like yours. I’m telling you, it might sound as strange to you as it feels to me, but I’m truly not from around here.”

The loremaster clasped his hands together, extending his index fingers and leaning them against his dry lips. “The arrival of a Beyonder would be momentous news. I would be a fool to believe it was possible. An old fool who should know better. Yet you give me pause.”

“Good. You say you have books. Are there any books that can tell me where I am?”

“Certainly.”

“How about a book that will help me get back to my world?”

The loremaster gave Jason a suspicious glare and lowered his voice. “You should not request imprudent information. Whether you are a prankster or a lunatic, we both know that the emperor forbids open discussion of such topics.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Jason said, backing toward the exit. “I don’t know the rules around here. I’m not trying to offend anyone, but I seem to keep stepping on toes. I don’t know about an emperor. If you don’t want to help me, I’ll take off, no big deal. Sorry I bothered you.”

“Wait.” The loremaster studied Jason shrewdly. “As I mentioned, visitors have become scarce. Are you really so eager to turn your back on the greatest store of learning in all the land? Suppose I humor your delusion. You claim to know nothing about this world. I know just the volume to provide some background.”

“Could it help me get home?”

The loremaster stroked his chin with a liver-spotted hand. “I’m not sure that information could be located in any book. But if you truly are a stranger to Lyrian, this will supply some context. Perhaps the Hand of Providence guided you here. Come.”

Jason followed the loremaster out of the entry foyer, past fluted pillars and bearded busts housed in oval niches. They strolled down long passages walled with tall bookshelves. Some held rolled scrolls, others engraved tablets. Jason noticed one shelf laden with books bound in iron. Another shelf showcased miniature books the size of thimbles.

After winding about in the book-lined labyrinth, the loremaster gestured for Jason to take a seat at a wide table of dark cedar. Grunting, the loremaster selected a heavy blue volume almost as tall as his waist, with silver letters embossed across the front in fancy script. He heaved the book onto the table. Not only abnormally tall and wide, the book was several inches thick. Jason read the title.

*An Abridged History of Lyrian.* The writer was identified as “Author Unknown.”

“You’re kidding,” Jason said, fingering the huge tome.

“This book can provide background regarding our world,” the loremaster explained.

“It’s enormous. Abridged history? Is that a joke?”

The loremaster shook his head. “Lyrian is an ancient land with a long and complex past. Much of the oldest lore is irrelevant today, but I can guide you to a couple of pertinent passages.” He opened the volume and turned past the majority of the pages. The book was in excellent condition—either new or very well preserved.

After leafing through several pages one at a time, the loremaster indicated a florid heading. “You can start here. Each section of the history features a summary at the outset.”

“ ‘Decline of the Age of Wizards,’ ” Jason read. The words were written in large black calligraphy. “You guys have wizards here?”

“Once there were many. Only one remains.”

“Wizards who cast spells?” Jason verified incredulously. “Who use magic?”

“Most call it magic. Wizards speak Edomic, the language of creation. Words comprehended by all matter and intellect. You’ll see it mentioned in the history. Read the summary.”

Jason sighed softly. The handwritten text was fancy but legible.

*The three major figures at the end of the Age of Wizards are universally regarded as the only true masters of the high Edomic tongue. While Eldrin and Zokar pursued their ambition to engineer the perfect race, Certius withdrew from the civilized world, content to populate the southern jungles with his creations. Eldrin famously labored in solitude, refusing to share his discoveries. Zokar allied himself with the other notable wizards of the era, taking on Arastus, Orruck, and Maldor as apprentices.*

“These guys have weird names,” Jason complained.

“Read on,” the loremaster prompted. “You needn’t absorb every detail.”

*There can be little doubt that over time Eldrin’s mastery of the nuances of Edomic surpassed the abilities of Zokar. Not long after Eldrin created the Amar Kabal, Zokar declared war.*

*Zokar had spent long years amassing the most fearsome army in the land, and he had forged alliances with the most powerful kingdoms of the age. The races he had engendered served him faithfully in the campaign against Eldrin, as did the torivors. (Despite claims by Zokar to the contrary, there remains*

*much doubt as to whether he actually engendered the torivors. See subsection F, paragraphs 7–33.)*

*Fearing an alliance between his greatest rivals, Zokar first sent his forces south to eliminate Certius, the lesser threat, and succeeded in the endeavor. The maneuver became known as Zokar's Folly, because an alliance between Certius and Eldrin was highly unlikely, and the operation gave Eldrin time to prepare. In anticipation of the impending battle he created the drinlings.*

*Prior to the climactic battle, Orruck and Maldor fell out of favor with Zokar, an ironic turn of events considering that it was Arastus who eventually betrayed Zokar in exchange for the right to become Eldrin's first and only apprentice. In the end Zokar was forced to face Eldrin in single combat, and the legendary duel is widely considered the end of the Age of Wizards.*

*After the victory, with the aid of Arastus, an embittered Eldrin chose to rid the land of all upstart wizards and looted the great stores of learning, effectively ending the study of Edomic. The two wizards passed out of knowledge without ever siring a new race.*

“The summary ends here,” Jason said, looking up.

“What follows is a much more thorough account of the condensed events,” the loremaster explained. “The serious student can delve into extensive references and commentaries.”

“I didn't understand all the words,” Jason admitted. “Especially the races. What's a drinling? Or a torivor? What was the Amar Kabal?”

“Unessential details for now,” the loremaster assured him. “What did you gather from the account?”

“Sounds like there should be no more wizards. Eldrin and Arastus wiped them out and then took off.”

“You understood enough.” The loremaster paged farther through the book until he had almost reached the end. “Here is the section describing the current age.”

“‘Dawn of the Rule of Maldor,’ ” Jason read aloud.

Lips pursed, the loremaster nodded. “After Eldrin departed from this land, a couple of the races he had engineered established their own kingdoms. Some races mingled with mankind; others remained aloof; others dwindled to extinction. Centuries passed. Nobody expected to see a wizard again. And then Maldor returned.”

“One of Zokar's apprentices.”

“Everyone, including Eldrin, assumed Zokar had disposed of Maldor. None guessed that he had survived in hiding. Maldor may have been the least powerful of Zokar’s apprentices, but he possesses a cunning intellect, and in a wizardless world his abilities were suddenly formidable. Read.”

*Maldor exercised extraordinary patience in his bid for power. None knew his identity until after he had established his stronghold at Felrook, fortified by alliances with Caston and Dimdell. In hiding, he successfully rallied many of the scattered and broken races of Zokar, eventually assembling and equipping an impressive force. His greatest advantage undoubtedly came when he gained control of the torivors.*

*Decades of brilliant political maneuvering followed. Allies became subjects, and enemies were held at bay by a complex system of truces. Maldor proved adept at isolating rival kingdoms, defeating them in battle, and then enlisting their resources in his cause. He managed to forestall unified resistance until such opposition lacked any hope of success. Although scattered free kingdoms remain, Maldor’s claim as exalted emperor of Lyrian has effectively gone unchallenged.*

“Your emperor is a wizard?” Jason asked.

“The last wizard,” the loremaster reported solemnly. “After witnessing the downfall of his master, he has taken no apprentices. The emperor is well aware of the advantage granted by his exclusive knowledge of Edomic, and he has forbidden the study of the language.”

“I take it that Maldor isn’t a nice ruler.”

The loremaster raised his eyebrows. “The emperor is a hard man. Of course, I am in his debt, since he permits me to remain in this post, overseeing this stockpile of learning.”

“If he’s a wizard, do you think he might know how to send me home?” Jason asked.

“Jason, if you are open to counsel, heed me now. It is unwise to earn attention from Maldor. Most people make a considerable effort to stay far from his thoughts. If you truly are a Beyonder, you might not want to be so liberal with that information. Lie low. Learn slowly and quietly. These days harsh consequences follow those who stand out in a crowd.”

Jason nodded pensively. “Who wrote the history I just read?”



The loremaster's eyes shifted from side to side. "Hard to say how these books come into being, author unknown and whatnot. I assume the text was passed down from days of yore."

"The content seemed pretty current. Didn't you say I was the first visitor in ten years?"

The loremaster pressed his lips together. "Maldor has labored for decades to solidify his power. I could have acquired this volume in a variety of ways."

"Maybe. But I bet you wrote the book."

The loremaster reddened and looked away. "Preposterous."

"Don't be shy! I'd be bragging. Look how long it is! And all handwritten!"

The loremaster sighed. "I dislike the idea of associating a written work with a person. Text that has been handed down from unknown origins carries more mystique. It becomes harder to dismiss."

"So you wrote it."

"Yes."

"I liked how even though the summaries were concise, they still told a story. Have you written anything else?"

"Nothing I intend to reveal to you. I wish only to be remembered as Author Unknown."

"Will you ever own up to something you write?"

The loremaster removed his spectacles and rubbed at his eyes. "Perhaps. My father once admonished me to master the laws that govern fine writing until I could weave my words into worlds. If ever I accomplish that feat, I will sign my name to the tale."

Jason surveyed the aisles of books all around him. Books written in another world—many lifetimes worth of stories and insight and philosophy that he would never read. The loremaster replaced his bifocals.

"I'm hungry," Jason said.

"We have nourished the mind," the loremaster said, patting his midsection. "Why not see to the belly?"

\* \* \*

The loremaster served lunch in a room he called the Contemplation Chamber. Giant masks decorated the walls, each a bronze human face, each with one eye squinted shut. Somewhat stained and smudged in places, a detailed mural of thousands of interlocking hands covered the ceiling. Illumination came from a

dozen candles in the black iron chandelier and a few oil lamps spaced about the room.

To Jason's surprise, the meal was served by the young boy he had met beside the river the night before. When the boy first entered the room, he locked eyes with Jason and subtly shook his head, a pleading expression flashing across his features. Jason took this to mean that the boy did not want their prior association revealed. The loremaster offhandedly introduced the boy as Hermie.

Jason ate ravenously. A small pile of bitter gray nuts began the meal. The loremaster insisted they were nutritious. Jason washed them down with a cool drink that tasted like diluted berry juice with a hint of honey. The main course was spotted parasol mushrooms, accompanied by a side of dry yellow berries with a flavor like sour candy. The mushrooms were bigger than Jason's hand. They possessed a tender, fleshy consistency and a salty savor not unlike ham. Jason consumed two of the sizable fungi. Dessert consisted of pie stuffed with purple pulp textured like pumpkin innards. Jason was delighted to find the pie sweet and delicious.

"This pie is excellent," Jason said.

"Yes, there is nothing quite like blue root pie."

"I was trying to compare the flavor to something."

"It is unique. How would I describe it? A bit like tasting the opposite of peppered venison in mint sauce."

"I'll take your word for it. Why are all these masks winking?" Jason pointed around the room with his fork.

The loremaster dabbed at his mouth with a frilled purple napkin. "One eye is open to all truth, the other closed to all deception."

"That makes more sense than I expected." Jason reconsidered the bronze faces as symbols of discernment. "Do you mind if I stay the night?"

The loremaster blinked. "I assumed you would stay much longer than a single night."

Jason shook his head. "I have to figure out a way home. My parents must be freaking out. My dog is probably starving. My life is there. Everyone I know, my friends. My school."

"You are a student? What better place for an education than the Repository of Learning?"

"This is a great place, it really is, but I can't stay."

The loremaster nodded regretfully. "I was looking forward to some company."

"You've got Hermie," Jason said.

“A mere lad.”

“I’m only thirteen.”

“That is the year a boy assumes the mantle of manhood. Hermie is but eleven.”

“Maybe you should relocate,” Jason suggested. “You’ll never have many visitors if you stay hidden away in this forest.”

The loremaster shook his head. “Only by my secluded location do I avoid unwanted scrutiny. Those who truly need and appreciate this facility find their way here.”

Jason helped Hermie clear the plates and silverware. In the small kitchen the loremaster refused to let Jason help wash.

“Waste no time dallying with trivialities—Hermie will clean the tableware. Explore the library while you can, for tomorrow may be too late. I only ask you not to trespass in the upper level. It is forbidden.”

“Forbidden? Why?”

Hermie shot Jason a curious glance.

“I cannot say,” the loremaster replied. “But I assure you it is not casually prohibited. My father used to make certain books in our family library forbidden because it was the only way to get me to read them. Boring things, mostly. A clever ruse. That which is not permitted is always most enticing. Do not mistake my intention. I counsel you in all sincerity—resist becoming intrigued. The upper level is completely off-limits for good reason. Understood?”

“Yes,” Jason said. Was the loremaster trying to employ the same trick his father had used, immediately after explaining what his father had done? The upper level might be full of boring textbooks and dictionaries and junk. Or it might be unusually cool, housing ancient artifacts or weapons or treasure. More important, the upper level might contain some clue that could help him find his way home. Hadn’t the loremaster recently explained that information about the Beyond was forbidden? Where better to look than the forbidden area of a library? The more he thought about it, the more it seemed the loremaster had offered a deliberate hint. He left the loremaster and Hermie behind in the kitchen, determined to sleuth out a staircase.

Jason wandered the maze of books, surprised at how easy it was to become disoriented. Before he encountered any stairs, Jason discovered a large atrium in the middle of the library, visible from all sides behind large panels of glass. He found a sliding door and ventured out into the verdant courtyard.

Overhead, the sun had passed midday. A few puffy clouds stood out against a field of blue. A covered well, complete with winch and bucket, stood in the middle of the atrium beside a stone sundial. Lush fruit trees overshadowed bushes bright with berries. Some of the fruit looked familiar, like colorful variations on plums and apricots, while other fruit appeared completely alien, like the gray furry fruit and the oblong, translucent fruit.

Once the courtyard garden had been properly explored, Jason returned to winding among the bookshelf corridors. Not a wall in the building lacked books. Books even occupied the space above doorways. Occasional hanging lanterns provided most of the light. Time after time Jason encountered dead ends, forcing him to backtrack. Finally, after extensive wandering, he arrived at a helical staircase in a rear corner of the massive building. He dashed up the spiraling steps two at a time and arrived at a large iron door riddled with tiny holes. The perforations were arranged in an orderly grid of columns and rows. Wooden pegs shaped like golf tees protruded from the ten center holes in the uppermost row.

Jason tried the handle. The door was locked. There was no keyhole near the handle. He began counting holes, tallying one hundred in each horizontal row, and about three hundred in each vertical column. A quick computation yielded a total of thirty thousand holes.

He pulled out a peg, hearing a snick as he did so. The peg was slightly longer than his little finger. Inserting the peg into a random hole, he heard it click into place. *Snick-click, snick-click, snick-click*—he tried the peg in various holes. Jason shook his head. It was the most complicated lock he had ever seen. He replaced the peg into its original hole. *Click*. The odds against randomly matching the ten pegs to the right combination of holes were staggering—far beyond something simple like winning the lottery.

Peering closely, Jason detected tiny symbols at the left of each row and at the bottom of each column. Each symbol was unique.

When closer inspection offered no new information, he retreated down the staircase. With nothing else to do, Jason roamed and browsed. He found books about farming and tool making. Many books were written in foreign languages he did not recognize. One book in English discussed how to construct and fortify a makeshift garrison in hostile territory. Another called *The Epics of Count Galin of Misenmarch* was a hefty book full of long poems. Jason envisioned himself bringing the book home and claiming authorship as a joke. How could it be

plagiarism if the material you borrowed came from another world? His English teacher would faint!

Jason was perusing an interesting manuscript called *These Short Lives*, which presented a supposedly factual account of a race of people whose lifespan was only two years, when a big dog with long white fur came into view around a corner. Jason closed the book. The dog just stood there, a juicy pink tongue lolling out. Jason approached cautiously, sinking a hand into the silky fur. “Good boy,” he said in a special voice reserved for canines. “You’re a good boy. You don’t want to maul me, do you?” Petting the animal made him wonder how his own dog was doing back home.

The dog walked away, then stopped to look back. A shiny silver bell dangling from the collar tinkled softly when the dog moved. “You want me to follow?” Jason asked, setting the book down.

The dog led him along a direct route back to the Contemplation Chamber. Dinner awaited on the table. It looked much like lunch, except that these mushrooms were yellow and shaped like stocking caps.

Jason took his seat across from the loremaster and began eating. Hermie was not present.

“That is quite a lock on the door to the upper level,” Jason said around a buttery mouthful of mushroom.

The loremaster froze with a bite halfway to his mouth.

“Where would a guy keep a combination to a lock like that?” Jason asked after swallowing.

“You are certainly a forward youth, if nothing else,” the loremaster fussed. “The upper level is forbidden. That includes me.”

“Did you design the door?”

“No.”

“Who did? The Unknown Designer?”

The loremaster shrugged.

“You know the combination, don’t you? What kind of librarian would be totally locked out of part of his own building?”

“Would you care to sample a bubblefruit hybrid I produced?”

“I repeat my question.”

The loremaster held up one of the oblong, translucent fruits Jason had noticed in the atrium. “The pure bubblefruit is virtually invisible. I mixed this one with a qualine. It tastes rather pleasant.”

“I’ll stay here beyond tomorrow if you tell me the combination.”

The loremaster raised his eyebrows. "If you were to trespass in the upper level, I would have to throw you out. If that is your design, I would prefer you depart at once."

Jason had lost interest in eating. The loremaster took a bite.

"You don't need to give it to me," Jason said with all the nonchalance he could muster. "Just tell me *how* to get the combination. A little clue. I'm only curious about the door. I've never seen a lock like that one."

The loremaster eyed him uncertainly. "A sudden interest in locks, is it? Very well, if you are determined. I have offered ample warning. A book called *The Life I Have Known* may contain a clue."

"How do I find the book?"

"I'll have it delivered to your room."

Jason returned to his food. He bit into the bubblefruit hybrid. The inside was syrupy, but sweet and good. Greenish fluid dribbled down his chin. He finished with a slice of blue root pie.

Afterward, while Hermie cleaned up, the loremaster escorted Jason to a bedroom. The austere chamber contrasted with the lavish architecture prominent elsewhere in the building. A small cot, a stool, a simple table, and a dresser topped with a laving basin were the only furnishings. Bare walls, bare floor, no windows.

Once he was alone, Jason blew out his single fat candle, plunging the room into darkness. Somewhere far off he heard the faint jingle of a bell. Taking a seat on his cot, Jason got out his cell phone, the glow from the screen pushing back the darkness. He reread his messages. The battery was nearly dead.

Jason wished Matt or Tim were with him. They had been his best friends for years. Matt was the most loyal person Jason had ever met, and Tim was hilarious. If they were here, Jason doubted he would feel scared.

But they weren't here. Nobody was here. He wondered if Matt and Tim would blame themselves for his disappearance. They would probably assume the blow from the baseball had given him a brain clot or something. He imagined them searching for his body. He wished he could somehow tell them that he was alive. He wished he could hop on his bike and meet up with them, maybe catch a movie, or throw a ball around, or organize a homerun derby.

Someone knocked softly on his door.

"Come in," Jason said.

Holding a candle, Hermie entered and shut the door. After setting the candle down, he sat on the floor. "Weird light," the boy commented. "Do you dabble in

Edomic?"

Jason glanced at his cell phone. "It's from the Beyond. It won't last much longer."

"Thanks for not saying anything about the river. I didn't have permission to be there."

"No problem," Jason said.

"What were you thinking, shooting an arrow at the raft?"

"Going off the waterfall seemed like a bad idea. I wanted to rescue them."

The boy huffed. "Are you trying to be some kind of hero? Is that why you're poking around the upper level?"

"I'm no hero," Jason assured him. "I just want to get home."

"Want to get to Harthenham, I'll bet."

"What's that?"

Hermie folded his arms. "Come on, you're really going to pretend you don't know."

"I really have no clue."

The cell phone died.

"There went your light," Hermie said.

"That was all the juice in the battery. Do you know how to get into the upper level?"

Hermie snorted. "I'm smart enough to stay away. I just help clean up around here and run errands. Here is that book you wanted." He held out a thin book bound in creamy leather entitled *The Life I Have Known and Other Stories*. "You'd have to be a little thick to miss the clue."

Jason accepted the book. "Thanks. Why not save me time and show me the hint?"

He held up both hands. "I'm not a part of this. The dog can help you get around. Anyhow, thanks for not mentioning how we met before. I could get in trouble. I'll keep quiet about you shooting folks with arrows."

"Fair enough."

Hermie picked up his candle and went to the door. "Get some sleep." He slipped out without waiting for a reply.

Jason was left in darkness.

He had hoped Hermie might help him. It would be nice to have a friend. But the boy had only seemed concerned with making sure Jason would keep their previous encounter confidential.



Jason reclined on his cot. This would be his second consecutive night in an alternate reality. Thanks to the loremaster, at least he now had reason to believe others had crossed over from his world to this one. That gave him a little hope that somewhere, somebody might know how he could get back. With luck the answer might be nearby, waiting behind the forbidden door.

Back home his parents would have called the hospitals and notified the police by now. He might even be on the news! They would probably search for him all over the zoo—the last place he'd been seen. He wondered if any evidence would implicate the hippo.

# THE WORD

Jason awoke the next morning in darkness. Rolling over, he saw a line of flickering light at the base of the door. He fumbled out of bed, splashed his face with water, ran his fingers through his hair, grabbed the book, and left the room. A guttering lamp in the hallway accounted for the unsteady illumination.

The big white dog lay outside the door. It rose and guided him to breakfast.

“Good day to you,” greeted the loremaster.

“Good morning.”

“I see Hermie brought you *The Life I Have Known*. Help yourself to some food. I’m off to man the front desk.”

“What’s the dog called?” Jason asked.

“Feraclestinus Androbrelium Pathershin the Seventh.”

“No, I meant his entire name.”

“To abbreviate, I call him Feracles. Come by if you need anything.”

The loremaster left. Jason drank a hot black beverage, which didn’t smell much like coffee. At first the drink was unbearably bitter, but sweetened with plenty of sugar it became palatable. Messy pieces of dripping fruit and a small bowl of really crunchy nuts completed the meal.

After wiping his hands on a napkin, Jason picked up the book. As with the volume from the day before, it was attributed to Author Unknown. He opened to the table of contents and found the titles of various short stories. Some stood out more than others. Apart from “The Life I Have Known,” he noticed “Conversations with an Osprey,” “Mysteries of the Deep,” and “Last Wishes of a Bumblebee.”

Jason thumbed forward to an arbitrary page and read the following:

*“How will you teach your children to fly?” I inquired of the mother. “I do not see how you could ever coax them into the air.”*

*“You do not understand because you are a man. Teaching a bird to fly is similar to teaching a man to swim. Can you swim?”*

“Yes.”

“Were you frightened when you learned? Frightened you would sink?”

“Naturally.”

“So it is with teaching birds to fly. Except we fly better than you swim. The air is our element. We are as clumsy walking on land as you are swimming in water.”

Weird stuff. The handwriting looked familiar. He had a guess at who had authored the book. He leafed through the pages, hunting for clues.

Eventually he flipped to the inside of the back cover. On the otherwise blank page a single word had been scrawled: *Moondial*.

Having never heard of a moondial, Jason hoped the term referred to the sundial out by the well.

As Jason closed the book, the white dog stared at him, head tilted, thick fur glossy. Could the dog know the library well enough to guide him to a destination?

“Hey, Feracles,” Jason said to the large dog in his special voice. “Will you take me to the atrium?”

The dog immediately padded out of the room. Jason followed skeptically, but sure enough, after zigzagging along a circuitous route, the dog brought him to the glass walls enclosing the garden.

Jason went out through a sliding door. Today was cloudier than the day before, but the sun was currently peeking through.

He crossed to the sundial, studying it closely. The stone pedestal was carved with a frowning sun on one side and a smiling moon on the other. The face of the sundial had ten symbols etched in a semicircular arc, each unique shape composed of fine golden lines. The ten symbols seemed suspicious considering the ten pegs in the grid of holes. None of the designs looked familiar, but he hoped the shapes would correspond with the symbols on the door.

Jason patted his pockets. Beneath his coveralls he wore his jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. He pulled out his wallet and keys. The wallet contained twenty-seven dollars, a student ID, a health insurance card, and an ATM card. The keys were to his house and the padlocks on his lockers at the zoo and at school. He wished his pockets had been stuffed with useful things.

“Think your master would loan me a pen and paper?” Jason asked the dog.

\* \* \*

That night Jason did not snuff out his candle when he went to bed. Instead, he opened the journal the loremaster had given him, the new binding creaking. The first page was defaced by scribblings he had made while getting accustomed to the quill. The next two pages showcased the most careful depictions he had been able to manage of the symbols on the sundial face.

Ten symbols would only represent the coordinates along one side of the grid. He had sought more clues at dinner, only to receive further reminders that the upper level was restricted. If the loremaster was playing mind games to pique his curiosity, the old guy was succeeding.

Jason did not think he needed another hint. He had a crazy idea to match a crazy place.

After waiting as long as his patience could endure, he gathered his writing gear and picked up the brass candleholder. Easing the door open, Jason peered out. All other lights had been extinguished. The library looked much more ominous in the wavering luminance of a single unprotected flame.

He crept down a short hall to the first of the shelves. A soft whine behind him nearly startled him into dropping the candle. The white dog nudged its nose against his leg.

“Take me to the atrium, Feracles,” Jason whispered. He followed slowly, cupping his hand to protect the feeble flame.

At the atrium he followed the dog outside and then slid the door shut. A hidden moon backlit a large cloud, fringing it with silver. He set his candle down carefully on the lip of the well and turned to inspect the moondial. The gold characters looked silver in the dim moonlight. Squinting closely, he discerned that the symbols were shaped differently from those he had copied during the day.

He impatiently watched the cloud migrate across the sky. One edge of the cloud gradually brightened as the opposite side dimmed. Then the nearly full moon appeared.

Bright silver characters shone in the lunar glow, as finely traced as their daytime counterparts but completely distinct in form.

Jason began sketching the moonlit symbols, patiently dipping his quill, careful to capture every detail. Since the moonlit markings corresponded with the positions of the daylight symbols, he paired the symbols that occupied the same location as likely coordinates for inserting pegs into the grid of holes. Clouds covered the moon twice as he drew, forcing him to pause for lengthy

intervals. At last, with the moon about to vanish behind clouds a third time, he completed the tenth symbol.

Jason went to the atrium door. "Here, Feracles," he called softly. The dog jangled over to him. "Take me to the staircase. Take me to the upper level."

The dog guided him across the garden to a different glass door. Jason slid the door open and followed the dog back into the convoluted passageways. After some time navigating through the gloom, they reached the foot of the stairwell. "Good boy." Jason stooped and rubbed the back of the dog's neck.

When he proceeded up the stairs, Feracles did not follow.

At the top Jason knelt by the door and scanned the symbols along the bottom of the columns of holes. He found one matching a moonlight symbol. Examining the designs beside the rows, he located one matching a symbol copied in the sunlight.

He gathered the ten pegs and began the process of matching each pair of symbols he had copied into his book with the corresponding symbols labeling the columns and rows. After finding each paired column and row, he traced the perpendicular lines of holes to the intersection and inserted a peg. Finding all ten intersections proved to be a tedious task. His eyes began to burn wearily as he triple-checked each coordinate to avoid making an error and having to repeat the entire process.

At last he inserted the final peg. The click was accompanied by a brief metallic tumbling inside the door. He grasped the handle; it turned, and the heavy door swung inward. "I sank your battleship," Jason murmured.

A musty scent wafted from the open portal. Squinting into the darkness with his candle held aloft, he could see shadowy shelves lined with dusty books.

Jason went back down the stairs. "Here, Feracles," he said. "Take me into the upper level."

The dog whined and retreated several steps.

"Come on," he repeated, bending down and patting one knee invitingly.

The dog snorted and shook its coat.

Jason returned to the ominous doorway. Now that the perforated door was open, his conviction wavered. The dog's hesitation was more unsettling than all the warnings the loremaster had expressed. But no matter how creepy it seemed, any chance of finding a way home meant he had to try.

He stepped through the doorway, candlelight pushing back the darkness. His passage stirred up a low fog of dust. The ceiling was lower than below, but otherwise the upper level seemed arranged much like the lower. Except that

most of the book spines were obscured beneath cobwebs and grime, making the titles and authors illegible. Maybe the upper level was forbidden because the loremaster was too lazy to clean it. Any respectable librarian would be ashamed.

Jason grabbed a couple of the nearest books and used them as doorstops. He wasn't going to chance the door closing spontaneously.

He wound his way into the book-lined corridors. The long shelves were constructed with undulant curves, giving the dreary passageways a warped, serpentine quality. The farther Jason traveled from the door, the more closely he cupped his hand around the flame. The silence was complete. He stepped softly, breathed quietly. Shadows jittered with the flickering of the tiny flame. The place was creepy, but nothing looked interesting enough to warrant the incredibly complicated lock on the door. He saw no treasure or weapons or intriguing artifacts. The knowledge in the books had to be what made this place off-limits.

His twisting path eventually led to a small reading area with a few tables and chairs. The furniture was sculpted of black stone. Armrests were carved with leering faces, and table legs took the form of fanged serpents. He wiped dusty cobwebs off the spine of a random book. *Subtleties of Manipulation*. The name "Damak" appeared at the base of the spine.

Setting his candle on a nearby table, Jason pulled out the book and opened to the introduction.

*Manipulation is a quiet tool of majestic power. Artfully manufacturing desires in others to suit one's own needs can be accomplished on an individual basis or on a worldwide scope. Clearly, a study of manipulation requires a profound understanding of the selfish motivators that drive men to action. Different motivators function best depending on the nature of the minds one seeks to dominate. Manifold motivators are available, including fear, the desire for wealth or respect or power, lust, duty, obedience, love, even altruism. Endless combinations may be employed to reduce the staunchest will to a malleable plaything. Learning to discover the appropriate mix of motivators for any given individual or group and mastering how to employ those motivators with a deft touch comprises the essence of manipulative studies.*

*The master manipulator lies as little as possible. He believes most, if not all, of what he professes. This quality makes him difficult to unmask. Once a subject realizes he is being manipulated, defenses are engaged and future*

*machinations become exponentially more challenging. The most satisfying victories occur over adversaries who do not realize they have been conquered.*

Jason closed the book.

He was beginning to understand why the upper level was restricted. A palpably dark feeling had come over him as soon as he began reading the introduction.

He brushed off a few more spines to reveal other titles. *Religion and Subjugation. Memoirs of a Lost Soul. The Unquenchable Thirst.*

Nothing sounded very wholesome.

He surveyed the multitude of dingy volumes surrounding him. A few sinister books did not confirm that no useful information could be found here. After all, forbidden information was what he needed. Any of the nearby volumes might hold information about hippopotamus portals or contain hints about how he might get home. Didn't a chance like that justify enduring a little creepiness? Probably. But not right now. Such an unsettled feeling had stolen over him that Jason decided to leave the upper level for the moment and return with a brighter light.

Raising his candle in a trembling hand, Jason tried to make his way back to the entrance. Eventually he realized the curving corridors had disoriented him. He should have left a trail of bread crumbs.

He attempted to double back to the reading area, but could not find that, either. Instead he came to a different open area, where the only furnishing was a black pedestal surmounted by a huge book. A plush, dark carpet woven with imagery of cruel thorns covered the floor.

Jason crossed to the book. It had to be important to be situated all alone in such a grand fashion. As he drew nearer, he gasped. Shocked curiosity impelled him forward.

The book appeared to be bound in human skin. Upon close examination Jason observed that the fleshy covering had tiny pores, fine hairs like the ones on his arm, and light blue veins visible beneath the surface.

Aghast, he tentatively touched the surface, withdrawing his finger instantly. It was warm to the touch, with a yielding texture that suggested more thickness than he had expected. It felt alive.

Morbid fascination rooted him to the spot. What sort of book would be bound in living flesh? No writing appeared on the skin to suggest title or author. The publisher must not have owned a tattoo needle.

Rubbing his neck, Jason found the hair there standing upright. He glanced at the dim bookshelves at the edge of his candlelight. Beyond the light the blackness and silence seemed more oppressive than ever.

The surface of the pedestal was slanted, so the book rested propped at an angle. He slid a finger beneath a corner of the cover and flipped it open to a title page written in extravagant calligraphy. The ink was a dark maroon.

*The Book of Salzared, bound in his hide, scribbled in his blood.*

He turned the page.

*Be cautioned, Reader. Some knowledge can never be unlearned. Such is the secret contained herein. Proceed only in defiance of this gravest warning, for the dire words that follow will set You in opposition to Maldor evermore.*

Jason read the words with mouth agape. What information could be so volatile? How could Maldor possibly know whether he had read this book?

The loremaster had insisted that discussing how to travel to the Beyond was forbidden by Maldor. Jason chewed on his knuckle. What if this book contained the knowledge he needed to return home? This could be it! The next page could hold his passport back to reality.

He turned the page. The writing continued in the same fancy script, almost too ostentatious to read, despite the overlarge characters.

*I, Salzared, Chief Scribe of Maldor, in a desperate act of betrayal, hereby impart knowledge pertaining to the only vulnerability of my Lord and Master, and do bind these words in my mortal flesh that they might be preserved against those many hands which would otherwise destroy them.*

*Behold, Maldor reigns in fearless might, and rightly so, for none may cause him harm, except by a single Word whose existence is His most closely protected secret.*

*The Word, spoken in His presence, will unmake Him entirely.*

*None, myself included, know all syllables of the Key Word. However, fragments of the Word are known to my fellow conspirators, who stand upon protected ground, awaiting one of sufficient courage to puzzle the syllables together.*



*Speak the Word aloud but once, in the presence of Maldor and at no other time, for its utterance will erase all memory of its existence. Writing down the entire Word would provoke a similar consequence.*

*By reading these words You have nominated Yourself to recover the Key Word, the only hope of deposing my Lord and Tyrant. Move swiftly. The knowledge You now possess marks You for prompt execution.*

*The first syllable is "a."*

*Now depart! Let not my sacrifice be in vain. Away!*

*Salzared*

Thumbing through the remainder of the yellowed pages, Jason found them all blank. He closed the tome.

The covering of the book had broken out in gooseflesh. So had Jason.

Could the admonitions he had read be real? Surely the book was of no great importance if it lay up here in this dusty attic. Behind the most intricately locked door he had ever seen. In a library hidden in the middle of a forest. Oh, crud.

Suddenly a flap of skin lifted on the center of the cover, revealing a glaring eye. A human eye.

Jason shrieked, dropping the candle and plunging the room into immediate darkness. Involuntary screams soared from his throat as he cowered on the ground, grasping for the fallen candle. He pressed his hand against scorching wax and cried out even louder.

With deliberate effort Jason clamped his jaw shut, swallowing the remaining screams. He rubbed his burned palm against the sleeve of his coveralls. That eye had looked right at him, slightly bloodshot with a dark iris, pupil adjusting to the candlelight. He shuddered.

Panic threatened to smother him. The oppressive blackness made him feel alone in the universe except for the texture of the carpet beneath him. Blood pulsed in his throat. What was he going to do now?

Then he heard a faint jingling. It grew rapidly closer.

He groped for his laser pointer key chain. The tiny beam made a little red dot across the room. Until that moment he had not appreciated how inferior a laser pointer was to a candle for purposes of illumination. At least it was something.

The red dot proved sufficient to see Feracles come bounding out of a gap in the bookshelves. Jason pocketed the key chain and clung to the dog as he would

to a life preserver. Refusing to hold still, Feracles kept nudging him to stand. Jason rose, maintaining a hand on the dog's furry back, and trotted blindly to keep up as he wound along an unseen route.

Soon he glimpsed light up ahead. They reached the open doorway and passed through to the head of the stairway. The loremaster stood there waiting, a half-shuttered lantern in one hand.

"You could not resist."

"Am I in trouble?"

The loremaster sputtered. "What sort of question is that?"

"I might have made a big mistake."

The old man nodded, eyes narrow. "Have you any idea what the enmity of Maldor means?"

"I'm guessing it's a bad thing?"

The loremaster shook his head sadly. "Perhaps you truly are a Beyonder. May Providence help you. Come."

The loremaster led Jason down the stairs and through the library. Moving at a brisk pace, Jason began to notice how exhausted he felt.

"Most every soul in Lyrian seeks to avoid Maldor's attention. You have just done the opposite."

"I just read—"

The loremaster raised a hand, turning his head away. "Say nothing of what you learned. The burden is yours to bear. Do not inflict the information upon others who willfully chose to stop at the title page."

"Then you know about the book! The one covered in real skin?"

"Of course, my boy." He tapped his temple. "The fact that I have not read that particular tome explains why I am still alive. Were you seen?"

"What do you—"

"You know what I mean."

Jason swallowed dryly. "Yes."

"You must depart at once."

"Actually, that's what the b—"

"Never speak of what you read! You may as well behead me."

"You're going to send me off into the dark?"

"The night is nearly spent. You will find your way. Follow the dawn for a day or two. Seek the Blind King. Perchance he can advise you."

At the front desk the loremaster gave Jason a brown traveling cloak, a blanket roll, and a small sack filled with mushrooms. Hermie awaited beside the

main door, regarding Jason with morbid fascination.

“Consume these berries now,” the loremaster said, handing him a palmful. “They will help overcome your fatigue. You’ll find more in the bag.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“You possess the secret the brave travel here to claim.”

“I didn’t want it.”

The loremaster frowned. “You hinted as though you did, and responded to the clues I offered in return.”

Jason felt sick. “It was a mistake! I hoped the book would tell me how to get home. Suddenly I’m public enemy number one. I didn’t understand!”

“I regret if that is true. It cannot be undone. You must flee.” The loremaster directed Jason to the door. “Take heart. Mighty men have failed to examine the words you read, have quailed at the responsibility and departed as cowards. You leave heroically. Go now. I bid you safe journey.” The loremaster hurried him out the door.

“Thank you,” Jason said, exiting in a confused stumble.

Feracles barked once as Hermie yanked the door shut.

He was alone.

Gray predawn light glowed at one end of the sky.

Jason took a deep breath, glancing back at the closed door. No doubts lingered that this was real. He was in terrible danger. As a friendless stranger in a foreign land, he had made himself the enemy of a mighty emperor. For the first time Jason fully accepted that he might never get home.

# THE BLIND KING

As Jason hiked away from the Repository of Learning, he soon realized that the loremaster was right about at least one thing—those berries had really replenished his energy. He felt like doing karate or acrobatics or a decathlon. All drowsiness gone, he strode toward the rising sun, wrapped against the chill in his cloak, wondering how long it would take to leave the woods behind.

All day he marched, traversing a rolling succession of forested hills, breaking only to snack on mushrooms. There was no denying anymore that somehow he really had been transported into an alternate reality. He could very well live out his life here without discovering a way back. There might not even be a way home. He had to focus on following the one lead the loremaster had offered, and pray the Blind King could help him get home.

Eventually Jason's thirst became irresistible. He stooped beside one of the cleaner-looking streams he had encountered and took a drink, trying to ignore the slimy moss coating the rocks and the bugs gliding across the surface where the water pooled. The cool water tasted good. He figured if he was going to get sick drinking from a stream, he might as well do it in style, so he drank until he was full.

The sun sank behind him, casting a golden glow over the woods. The force of gravity seemed gradually to increase as Jason's berry-induced vigor wore thin. When he crested a final hilltop and found more hills beyond, he spread out his blanket beside a tree and slept instantly.

\* \* \*

The following afternoon, with the trees thinning and the hills flattening, Jason found the parallel ruts of a cart track. The weedy track headed generally eastward, so he followed it until it evolved into a narrow lane.

Glancing back at the last of the wooded hills, he froze, certain he had seen a form dive into the shadows a good distance up the slope. He stared at the spot where the half-glimpsed figure seemed to have landed. Leaves whiffled in the breeze. He saw no other movement. Finally he continued along the lane,

occasionally stealing quick glances behind, but noticed nothing else out of the ordinary.

After a time a strange cottage came into view, obnoxiously painted in many bright shades, with no length of trim or windowsill matched in color. Sequined curtains shimmered behind octagonal windows. Smoke twisted up from a chimney composed of yellow and blue bricks. A low green fence painted with innumerable flowers enclosed a spacious yard.

“Pssst, hey, you, longshanks, step over here.”

The harsh whisper came from a stand of low trees to his left, making Jason jump and turn.

“Be quick about it,” the voice urged. Near the base of a tree, obscured by brush, squatted a disheveled man in layers of dark, filth-stained clothing. He wore fingerless gloves of gray yarn. A shapeless black hat sat on his head like a deflated basketball. His furtive face bristled with whiskers. “Come down here out of sight.”

“Are you trying to rob me?”

“I’m harmless. Be quick.”

Jason complied, descending the shoulder of the lane to stand above the stranger within the cover of the trees and undergrowth. “What do you want?”

“I know this community,” the man said. “You’re an outsider. What brings you this way?”

“I’m looking for the Blind King,” Jason said.

The man squinted up at him skeptically. “I suggest you move along. There’s barely enough pickings around here for one man to quietly skim the cream. Two would starve.”

“I’m not here to beg,” Jason said.

“Beg?” the man spluttered, obviously offended. “I’m no beggar! I live by my wits! And I don’t need interlopers stirring up the henhouse.”

“Why are you hiding here?”

“I’m taking measure of the situation,” he said. “Franny’s been baking. Mind crouching a little? Good lad. Name’s Aster.” He held out a hand. Jason shook it, certain the courtesy was transmitting fleas.

“I’m Jason. I’m not here to cause trouble for anyone. Once I find the Blind King, I’m sure I’ll head elsewhere. I’ve got plenty of my own problems.”

Aster gave a curt nod. “I believe you.”

“You’re going to steal from that house?”

Aster's face split into a wicked grin. "More than likely. Not enough to do the owner any harm, mind you. Just pinch a pie or two."

"Do you travel much?" Jason asked.

"Don't have much use for it. Travel involves uncertainty. I found myself some well-fed gulls, so I chiefly stay hereabouts. Live off the surplus. Say, you don't happen to have a morsel to spare? Not a handout, mind you. I'll pay you back tenfold in meat pie if you'll wait around for an hour or so. It's just that all this waiting has teased my appetite."

Jason opened his food sack. "I guess I could spare a couple of mushrooms."

The vagrant pulled a disgusted face. "You must be in a worse fix than I am, if you've resorted to dining on fungus. And I honestly have no idea what to make of your outfit. But you strike me as a companionable fellow. Tell you what—sit with me a spell and I'll snatch us a hearty meal. Assuming you'll move along afterward."

The reek of the man alone was sufficient deterrent. "Thank you for your generosity, but I'd better keep moving. I actually meant to knock on the door to that cottage and ask directions."

The vagrant suddenly looked alarmed. "You won't seek to spoil my raid, right, friend? I've been counting on this meal."

Jason wondered if the man could be dangerous. "I'll do my best to repay your friendliness," he replied ambiguously.

"Fair enough," Aster said. "Try not to cause a stir. Give my regards to the Blind King."

Jason returned to the lane, glad for the fresh air, and strolled to a sky-blue gate in the low green fence. "Hello?" he shouted. "Anybody home?"

A moment later the front door opened, and an obese woman with a bright scarf tied round her head leaned out, a cheery smile spreading her cheeks. Her smoothly bloated features gave her face an ageless quality. The smile disappeared when she saw Jason. "What business have you here?"

"I'm just passing through the area," Jason said amiably.

"This town has no use for drifters," the woman warned, scowling. "Keep on walking."

Jason looked around. He saw no town. Her home must be on the outskirts. "I'm wondering if you can direct me to the Blind King?"

Her scowl deepened. "Are you one of his misfits? You ought to know where to find him."

"I've never met him," Jason said. "I need his advice. I'm Jason."

The woman sighed. "I don't mean to be rude, Jason, but these are ugly times. Fair faces and kind words can disguise foul intentions."

"I'm only asking for directions," Jason maintained. "I'm not trying to make waves."

The woman opened the door wider, and an enormous dog padded onto the porch. The beastly canine looked like a bulldog the size of a Saint Bernard. Its hair was short enough to imply it had recently been shaved bald. The animal shook its deeply folded face and emitted a brusque sound between a growl and a cough. Jason would not have been eager to steal anything from a house with such a monstrous guardian. Aster was apparently bolder than Jason had realized.

"Puggles here would prefer if you stopped straining our hospitality," the woman insisted. "I have an alarm beside the door. Don't make me call the militia."

Jason glanced over toward where Aster was hiding. "Listen, lady," Jason confided in a loud whisper. "I don't really need anything from you. I have food in my bag and a destination in mind. But I have important information."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean? Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. I just happen to know about a thief who intends to raid your house."

Her expression relaxed, and she chuckled. "You mean Aster?"

"You know him?"

A smile crept onto her face. "That scoundrel takes food from me three times each week, like clockwork. I've known him for years. The loafer refuses to accept charity, but if I let him feel like he's stealing, he'll swipe whatever I leave to cool on the windowsill. He fancies himself a soldier of fortune. I would welcome him to stay in a guest room, but he won't have it. Believe me, I've tried."

"How odd."

"Perhaps. But he keeps his pride, and I perform a service for a friend. He watches out for me. He's run off troublemakers more than once."

"You're a generous person."

Her smile widened, then faltered. "Funny he didn't bother you."

"We spoke," Jason said.

She nodded. "He's an able judge of character. You must have landed on his good side." She looked Jason up and down. "You tried to warn me of trouble. You can't be all bad. You wear strange apparel. Do you come from far away?"

“You have no idea,” Jason said. “Look, I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but I could really use directions to the Blind King.”

The woman paused, biting her lower lip. “I’m Francine. Franny. I hate to be unwelcoming. It isn’t my desire. You can come up to the porch if you like, Jason. I can at least offer you some bread.”

“Would you rather I swiped it from your windowsill?”

“Don’t try it. Puggles knows Aster. I’d end up finding pieces of you buried around the yard.”

Jason held up both hands. “Okay. Maybe the porch would be best.” He reached for the gate, and Puggles barked. Jason paused.

“Puggles, heel,” Franny ordered, slapping her thigh. She pointed for the dog to go back inside the house, and the bulky canine trundled out of sight.

Jason let himself through the gate. Franny disappeared inside. By the time Jason had mounted the porch steps, she had returned with a loaf of bread wrapped in a coarse bag.

“I have a weakness for the downtrodden,” she confessed. “But that doesn’t make me gullible. A word from me, and Puggles will tear you apart. If you know boarhounds, you know I’m not exaggerating. And we know Aster is watching as well.”

“I hear you,” Jason said politely. “About the Blind King . . .”

“It isn’t far. Continue down my lane to the crossroads and turn left. You’ll pass the Gamester’s farm, fork right onto the gravel road, and shortly come into view of the castle.”

“So he’s a real king with a castle and everything?”

“Not everything,” Franny clarified. “He’s the unofficial arbiter around here. It would be a stretch to label him a real king. Opinions about him vary. He settles disputes, offers advice. Some do his bidding, but he lacks real authority from the emperor.”

“Will it be hard to get into his castle? Do I just knock?”

“Speak with the gatewarden. The king grants audience liberally. You really know so little about him?”

“I only know I need to have a talk with him.”

“Your business is your business. By all reports he is a just arbiter. Some who surround him seem odd. You’ll have to form your own opinion.”

“What do you think of him?” Jason asked.

“He keeps a fairly high profile in a time when it might be more prudent to lay low. You should be on your way.”



“Thank you, Franny.”

“You seem very open,” Franny said sadly. “You should travel with more care. There are plenty abroad who would take advantage of you.”

Jason descended the porch steps and backed toward the gate. “Thanks for the warning, and the bread.”

“We never met,” Franny said, retreating into her multihued house and closing the door.

Jason waved at the trees where Aster was hiding, then started down the lane. He opened the bag and tore off a chunk of warm bread, which tasted hearty. By contrast it made the bread back home seem ridiculously flimsy. Grateful to have something to eat besides mushrooms, Jason consumed almost half the loaf.

Not long after Franny’s home passed out of sight, Jason reached the crossroads. A white stone obelisk marked the intersection. One side of the obelisk was deeply scarred, as if an inscription had been gouged away. Aside from the tall marker and the dirt roads, no evidence of civilization could be seen in any direction.

Jason turned left, passing feral fields of tall grass interrupted by occasional copses of trees. He saw the charred remnants of a house, thorny shrubs growing up among the blackened wood, the scorched chimney still mostly intact.

Presently he came upon tended fields where crops grew in long rows. A fenceless house came into view up ahead: a low, sturdy structure. Out front a burly, shirtless man in overalls sat on a short stool sketching on a large parchment propped on an easel. Another fellow sat nearby on the grass, fiddling with a series of interlocked iron shapes. On a nearby table rested a ceramic dome segmented by lines suggesting it was a complex three-dimensional puzzle. Farther back towered a bronze sculpture comprised of bizarre shapes balanced precariously. Certain portions of the sculpture were on pivots and swiveled lazily in the breeze, squealing faintly.

“Hi, there,” Jason said from the lane. “Is one of you the Gamester?”

“I am,” said the man in overalls. He stood, a husky man with arms like a linebacker. He seemed a tad wary, but unafraid.

“Did you make that puzzle?” Jason said, jerking his head at the man trying to unlink the shapes.

“I did, along with many others.”

“I like that sculpture.”

“It can be reassembled in many combinations.”

“Do you sell your puzzles?”

He shook his head. "I give them away."

"Do many people come by?"

"Mainly just Jerome here. Most folks would rather not bother. Sometimes a few will come and watch Jerome solve a series of my toughest creations."

Jason gestured at the parchment. "Are you designing a new puzzle?"

The Gamester nodded. "I permit no man to view my designs." He rolled up the parchment, even through Jason could view none of the drawing from where he stood. "What brings you this way, stranger?"

"I need to speak with the Blind King."

"How do you know the Blind King?"

"Isn't he famous?" Jason answered vaguely.

"Locally, yes, to some extent. But you are not from these parts."

Jason was unsure what to say. "It might be best not to ask me too many questions."

"Fair enough," the Gamester replied. "Safe journey."

Jason turned his back on the peculiar pair. The Gamester had not acted very welcoming and had seemed a little too curious. He walked briskly.

After a few miles Jason stopped and stripped off his gray coveralls for the first time, revealing his T-shirt and jeans. A tentative sniff proved that his sweat-marked underarms reeked like unwashed monkeys. It was long past time to wash up and do some laundry. Maybe the castle would have someplace to bathe.

Continuing on with cloak, blanket roll, and coveralls bundled under one arm, he eventually forked right onto a gravel road. Crunching along the gravel sapped more energy than walking on the hard-packed lane. The road wound around a hill, finally bringing him below the shade of broad-leafed trees.

As he rounded the back side of the hill, the castle came into view, constructed atop a shallower hill behind the first. The massive stone complex looked abandoned. Sagging walls topped with crumbling battlements had collapsed entirely in some locations. Only two towers remained standing, one of which was so crooked and damaged it looked ready to topple at a cough from a butterfly. Jumbled heaps of stone and rotted beams marked where other structures had already fallen. The decrepit castle looked like an ideal hideout for thieves or vagabonds. No wonder Aster had told Jason to send the Blind King his regards.

Jason sighed. Had the loremaster misled him? Might he have sent him into a trap? Jason was quickly losing confidence that the Blind King would be able to help him. But with no apparent alternatives, what else could he do?

The gravel path led Jason to a corroded, raised drawbridge with a small door built in its center. A plank led across the shallow, dry moat. Outside the door stood a grave, middle-aged man clad in mismatched armor and clutching a poleax. “Who might you be, sir?” the gatewarden inquired stiffly. Despite the ruins around him he apparently took his job seriously.

“I might be anyone,” Jason said. “I’m searching for the Blind King.”

“Have you scheduled an audience with His Majesty?”

“No. I’ve recently arrived from a distant land.”

“Do you come on an errand of royal consequence?”

“Of course.”

“Your name?”

“Jason.”

“Wait here while I inquire within.” The man unlocked the door using a key from his belt. Probably not the best defensive strategy to give a lone, exposed guard the key to the door he was protecting. Then again not the best idea to have huge gaps in your walls, either. The gatewarden disappeared through the door.

A few minutes later he returned. “His Majesty bade me to admit you. Take care to show him the respect befitting a sovereign of his magnificence.”

The gatewarden escorted Jason across a courtyard where weeds thrived between the cracks of uneven paving stones. They passed close by the precariously teetering tower. The entire complex appeared deserted. Nobody roamed the courtyard, and the windows in the surviving structures looked vacant. Motioning with his poleax, the gatekeeper ushered Jason through a set of double doors into the sturdiest building within the castle compound, which adjoined the only solid tower.

The building housed a great hall. Birds roosted in the rafters, and white streaks of droppings marked the floor and trestle tables. At the far end of the room, upon a moldering dais, a shabby man sat upon a battered throne. A dingy rag bound his eyes, a tarnished crown rested upon his gray hair, and a grimy green robe edged in dirty white fur enshrouded his body. He looked like some old homeless guy playing the part of a wise man in a soup-kitchen Christmas pageant.

Three attendants stood nearby: a mustached man in a stained velvet cap fingering a dented trumpet, an ugly woman with her hair caught up under a faded bonnet, and a humbly clad, young minstrel holding a lute.

“Presenting Lord Jason,” called the man in the velvet cap in a proud voice, blasting a flourish on his trumpet for emphasis. The loud notes sounded brassy and annoying, echoing harshly off the bare walls of the cavernous hall.

“One moment,” croaked the old king. “First allow my chancellor to complete his report.”

“As you will, sire,” the minstrel said in a courtly voice, casting a nervous glance at Jason. “As I was recounting, the invading armies have been repelled beyond our frontiers. General Braddock reports staggering enemy casualties. He hesitates at our borders awaiting your command.”

“Onward,” the king coughed, waving an arm. “Use our initiative to drive them into oblivion before they can reform.”

“A dispatch will be sent at once.”

“Sooner,” the king demanded. “What now?”

“The matter of Lord Jason,” said the man in the velvet cap.

“Come forward,” rasped the old king, beckoning with one hand.

Jason gaped at the ridiculous scene.

“Go on,” urged the gatewarden quietly.

Jason approached the dais. “Greetings, mighty king,” he said politely, opting to play along with the charade. It required some effort to restrain his sarcasm.

“Welcome to my realm,” the king intoned, spreading an arm outward, sightlessly indicating the damaged walls and dilapidated furnishings. It was embarrassingly clear that the Blind King believed he ruled a grand domain. Jason felt tempted to turn and walk out. There seemed no chance that this pathetic pretender could help him. But it would be rude. And he had no other place to go.

“What brings you before His Majesty?” asked the minstrel, now speaking in a softer, higher-pitched tone.

“I come seeking wisdom,” Jason replied, trying to sound formal.

“He comes to the right place,” the minstrel declared in a different voice, having changed positions. The others cried out, “Hear, hear,” repeating the words in various voices. What an act! Jason threw in a “Hear, hear” of his own.

The king raised his hands for silence. “What wisdom do you seek, young traveler?”

“I’m not entirely sure.”

The attendants murmured theatrically.

“What guided you to my kingdom?”

“I was referred here by a loremaster. He lives in a repository—”

“Say no more. I understand.” Jason noticed the king’s grip momentarily tighten on the arms of the throne.

The attendants mumbled vaguely about the perceptiveness of the king. The woman crept some distance away, coughed loudly, and returned.

“I would converse with Lord Jason at once in the privacy of my chambers,” the king proclaimed.

The attendants looked shocked. Apparently this was an infrequent invitation.

“As you command, Your Majesty,” the minstrel finally responded in a deep voice.

The woman aided the king to his feet and helped him down the dais steps. “Let young Jason serve as my guide,” the king said. The woman stepped away, and the gatewarden hurriedly directed Jason forward. The king placed a hand on his shoulder. Jason followed the gatewarden out one side of the hall.

The gatewarden eyed Jason, making grandiose gestures. Jason took the cue. “You have a spectacular castle,” he said.

“Most gracious of you,” the king replied in his raspy voice. “We will proceed alone from this point.” The gatekeeper bowed and returned to the hall. When they advanced to a curving staircase, the king grasped the banister. “I require no further aid.” Jason followed the king up the stone steps, into the more stable of the two towers. The old guy mounted the long flight at an impressive pace. Despite his long gray hair and beard he seemed in healthy condition.

Eventually they spiraled up to the highest room in the tower. The stairs stopped at a heavy door bound in iron. “Here we are,” the king said, unlocking the door and leading Jason through the portal.

The room was nicely appointed, with clean furnishings and a canopied bed. The king moved about the room almost as if he could see. With one hand extended probingly, the king found a cushioned chair. “Please be seated.”

Jason took a seat across from the king, who sat straight and tall. For the first time Jason noticed the broadness of his shoulders. His bearing somehow seemed more regal than when he had been slumped upon the throne.

“Bridonus sent you,” the king stated.

“He did, Your Majesty.”

“Then you have seen inside the book bound in living skin?”

The question surprised Jason. “I have.”

The king exhaled. “At long last.”

“How do you know about the book?”

“I too have seen within its pages, though few in my kingdom know this fact. You have part of the Word?”

Jason stared at the ragged king. “The first syllable.”

“A great burden now rests on your shoulders,” the king murmured. “You must think me a fool.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have no army. I know I live inside a derelict castle with a handful of well-meaning courtiers. Some of them do not realize I know this, or they pretend not to realize. It gives them great satisfaction to believe they have convinced me that I rule a mighty domain. I do rule here, but my kingdom is the opposite of mighty. For their benefit I put on a stately air, and I play along with the silly intrigues and wars they fabricate.”

Recovering from his absurd first impression, Jason was beginning to hope this king might be able to help him after all. “I’ve come across some weird relationships lately.”

“Explain.”

“A woman who lets a hobo steal from her because he refuses to accept her charity. A game maker who crafts puzzles for the single person who takes the time to solve them. And now you and your subjects.”

The sightless monarch nodded. “People find meaning where they can. These are uncertain times. Part of the reason I play along with our ludicrous pretensions is because it casts us in a ridiculous light. The more absurd we seem, the less we need to fear the emperor.” He folded his hands upon his lap. “You have a sharp eye for connections. Where do you hail from?”

“That’s hard to explain.”

The king stroked his beard. “Are you a Beyonder?”

Jason’s heart rate quickened. “Bridonus used that word. I think so.”

“How did you come to our world?”

“I know how this sounds.” Jason shifted uncomfortably. “I came here through a hippopotamus.”

“A water horse? Intriguing. Recount how it transpired.”

Jason was thrilled the old guy seemed to believe him. “I worked in a zoo, and one day I heard music coming from the hippo. I got too close trying to listen and fell into the tank. The hippo swallowed me. Except not really. I was suddenly sliding down a tunnel. Then I came out of a tree and couldn’t get back.”

“What happened next?”

“Well, the music came from a bunch of musicians floating on a raft.”

“The Giddy Nine.”

“That’s right! They were headed for a waterfall. I tried to rescue them, but I messed it up and everyone got angry. Then I found the Repository of Learning, read the book, and Bridonus booted me out and told me to find you.”

The Blind King nodded, stroking his beard again, a faint smile bending his lips. “Perhaps those merrymakers were right after all,” the king murmured. “They summoned a Beyonder.”

“Excuse me?”

“The leader of the Giddy Nine, Simeon, was an adventurous man, more soldier than minstrel. He used their music as a subversive tool, so naturally the performers began to make enemies. He took time off and went to visit a prophetess, one of the few remaining oracles with any real credibility. The act required an arduous journey. Upon his return he consulted with me before implementing her instructions.”

“Some oracle told him to float off a waterfall?” Jason asked.

“Essentially. Tell me about your life in the Beyond.”

“I’m a student. My dad is a dentist. I live in a nice house. Our world is really different from yours.” As Jason spoke, he realized how far away all of that had already begun to feel. He was sitting in an ancient tower—homework and baseball seemed almost surreal.

The Blind King nodded pensively. “Have you ever sacrificed for a cause?”

“Um . . . I’ve helped with some car washes to raise money for our local soup kitchen. Nothing drastic. I keep trying to understand where I am, and how I can get home. Can you help me?”

“Not many remain who possess the sort of information you seek. Of those who do, few would bother to help you. Maldor discourages the naming of places. He forbids the production of maps. He frowns upon traveling. He teaches the populace to distrust strangers. He wants a fog of ignorance to disconnect our world. None are allowed to discuss the Beyond or the forbidden language. Many have forgotten much, or have never learned it. Others pretend to have forgotten.”

“But you’re not afraid of the emperor?”

“I am afraid for many reasons. Not so much for myself. I love this land. I do what I can.”

“Can you help me understand what I should do to get home? Or maybe where I should start looking? What do you know about the Beyond? I still don’t really get where I am.”

The king scratched his cheek. “I can’t say how to access the Beyond. I’m not sure who might be able to tell you. Others have crossed over from the Beyond, though never frequently, and as of late, traffic between our worlds has come to a standstill.

“I can do my best to orient you. Years ago this particular fiefdom was called Fortaim, and an earl occupied this castle. Fortaim rests upon a peninsula that juts westward from the mainland out into a vast ocean. Following the river westward over the falls, you would have come to the estuary where it empties into the sea. But you went south without a trail until you happened upon the Repository of Learning. From there you came eastward along the peninsula until you arrived at this ruined castle. The river, once called the Telkron, lies a few miles to the north.”

Jason was impressed. “Who needs a map with you around?”

The Blind King steepled his fingers. “Once I had eyes, and I used them to travel widely in search of the Word.”

“How did you lose them?”

“In a fight with a devious conscriptor. He hurled powdered acid in my face, flaying my skin and stealing my sight. A small inhalation scorched my throat, damaging my voice. The conscriptor captured me. Eventually I came before Maldor. The emperor offered me new eyes. I refused. I would not accept the restoration of my sight at the price of becoming one of his spies. So I was delivered to his tormentors.”

Jason swallowed. This old king was something serious.

“Now you must pursue the Word,” the king said.

“Honestly, I’d rather find a way home.”

“No doubt you would. Should you encounter a way back to the Beyond, I would be the last to blame you for fleeing our world. We teeter on the brink of destruction. But a path back will be difficult to find. Perhaps impossible. In the meanwhile you should seek the Word. Mark my warning—Maldor already pursues you. Seeking the Word is your sole chance for survival. Remain still, or wander aimlessly, and you will be taken.”

Jason shifted uncomfortably. He felt no heroic urge to become Blind Lord Jason. “Did you learn much of the Word?”

“I learned some. More than most, I believe. But the syllables I acquired are lost, along with the memories of where I found most of them. Maldor’s tormentors used relentless conditioning to abolish many recollections. When it



comes to the Word, I remember few specifics. But I retain a few fragmented memories on the subject. I still remember Bridonus, and the book itself.”

“So I should leave, then?”

“Rest here for the night. There is somebody you must meet, a fellow traveler. Share a meal with us. I will provide further counsel on the morrow. How does roasted pheasant strike you?”

“I’ve been living off of mushrooms.”

“Go ring the bell twice. It will summon Chandra, my cook.”

Jason went to a bell mounted atop a dresser and delivered a pair of sharp blows with the tiny mallet resting beside it.

# RACHEL

Jason stood at a narrow window, studying the last embers of the sunset, when a slender man of medium height brought a huge tray to the Blind King's lofty chamber. A shiny scar interrupted his features, starting above his hairline and curving down his cheek almost to his jaw. Offering no introduction, the attendant moved swiftly and silently, rearranging furniture until a seat awaited Jason across from the Blind King, with a small table between them. With quiet efficiency the man shuttled the contents of the tray to the table. Before long the table held three place settings, a bowl of fruit, a charger brimming with mashed vegetables dusted with spices, a carafe of golden fluid, a pitcher of water, and a platter heaped with slices of white meat.

"Thank you, Dorsio," the Blind King said as the attendant picked up the empty tray. "If you would be so kind as to fetch our other guest."

Dorsio snapped his fingers, turned, and exited the room, closing the door silently. From the moment he had entered, the attendant had never looked Jason in the eye.

"Please, have a seat," the Blind King invited.

Jason sat down. "Dorsio seemed really businesslike."

"Forgive his reticence. He cannot speak. In my role as the Blind King I must balance various public and private responsibilities. With my public face as the ridiculous veneer, I privately work to undermine the emperor. Dorsio is part of my private circle. He is quite adept at handling sensitive matters. We have developed a system where he traces messages on my palm, or uses snapping for simple acknowledgments."

"I'm curious about our other guest," Jason confessed.

"Satisfaction will soon replace curiosity," the Blind King said. "Not many of my associates have met her. She arrived here two nights ago. I believe your destinies are linked."

The door opened, and Dorsio escorted a girl into the room. She was almost a head shorter than Jason, and didn't look much older than he was. Her short

brown hair had a stylish cut, and she had dark brown eyes and a faint spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her clothes seemed homemade and didn't fit right: The dark yellow shirt sagged in the shoulders, and the coarse brown pants were too loose in the waist, cinched into place with a wide belt. The Blind King rose politely, and Jason awkwardly followed his lead.

Dorsio exited quietly as the girl approached the table.

"Thank you for joining us," the Blind King said with a smile, gesturing toward her seat.

The girl sat down, eyes regarding Jason with interest. "So you're the mysterious visitor."

"You stole my line," Jason said, trying to recover from the shock that the visitor was a cute girl around his age.

"They haven't changed your wardrobe yet," she commented, looking him up and down.

"Those aren't your clothes?" Jason asked.

She smirked, plucking at the yellow top. "Not exactly my style. But my other outfit makes me look too much like a Beyonder."

"You're a Beyonder too?" Jason exclaimed.

The Blind King sat down.

The girl grinned. "They warned me in advance that you're from my world. Totally ruined the surprise."

Jason glanced at the Blind King. Their host waited in silence, a small smile on his lips, listening with his hands folded on the edge of the table. Jason realized he was the only person still standing, and sat down. "How long have you been here?"

"This will be my fifth night," she replied.

"Mine, too!"

"Pardon me," the Blind King interjected. "Would the two of you mind verifying that you both truly come from the Beyond? I do not believe either of you is an imposter, but it never hurts to be certain."

"Ooh," the girl said with delight. "Cross-examination."

"Where are you from?" Jason asked.

"Olympia, Washington," the girl responded. "You?"

"Vista, Colorado."

She nodded vaguely. "What's the capital of Pennsylvania?"

"I don't know. Philadelphia?"

“No. But that’s the kind of wrong answer somebody from America would give. Let me guess, you’re not a very serious student?”

“Just because I’m not a trivia expert doesn’t make me a bad student,” Jason complained. “I’m in eighth grade. I take honors classes. What’s the actual capital of Pennsylvania?”

“Harrisburg,” she replied smugly.

“I’ll believe you. Who won the 2004 World Series?”

She shrugged. “The Yankees?”

“The Yankees? And you claim to be an American?” He enjoyed rubbing it in after her attitude about Harrisburg. “It was the Red Sox. The year they broke the curse.”

“But the Yankees win the series a lot, right?”

“They’ve won the most,” he conceded.

“Do you play baseball or just watch it?” she asked.

“I pitch for school and on a club team. And I’m a pretty good infielder. What year are you in school?”

“I skipped a grade, so I’m in ninth. But I’m homeschooled. I only go to school to run track.”

“How do you skip grades when you’re homeschooled? Mom just decides to shorten her teaching career?”

She scowled. “My classes are much harder than anything in public schools.”

“If you say so. What track events?”

“Hurdles and pole vault.”

“Pole vault?” Jason repeated, impressed. “You must have some guts.”

“I like trying new things,” she said.

“I’m long past convinced,” the Blind King inserted. “Judging from your inflections, I would say you speak English in a similar manner, and based on your intonations, I feel confident that you’re both telling the truth. But I already knew that. Consider the exercise a lesson in vigilance. Without extreme caution you will not survive. Shall we eat?”

Jason started transferring meat to his plate. “What’s your name?” he asked the girl.

“Rachel,” she replied, spooning vegetables onto the Blind King’s plate, then helping herself. “You?”

“I’m Jason.” Following her example, he shared several cuts of pheasant with the Blind King.

“Don’t mind me,” the Blind King protested. “My table is set in such a fashion as to enable me to feed myself. Eat your food and get acquainted.”

“Can you believe we’re actually here?” Rachel asked as Jason made a small pile of mashed vegetables on his plate.

“I’ve had a hard time getting used to all of this,” Jason admitted, trying a bite of pheasant. “Did you get swallowed by a hippo too?”

“Excuse me?”

“Jason came into our world through the jaws of a hippopotamus,” the Blind King explained. “The residue of very old magic. There is no rarer or stranger portal connecting our realities.”

Rachel pursed her lips. “What, the way I came here was typical?”

The Blind King shook his head. “In these times any visit from a Beyonder is virtually inconceivable.”

“You came through a different way?” Jason asked.

“I was hiking with my parents,” Rachel said, her eyes losing focus. “We were in Arches National Park, in southern Utah.”

“But you’re from Washington,” Jason said. “Let me guess—the vacation schedule for homeschool is flexible.”

“I actually have less vacation time than most kids,” Rachel corrected. “Homeschool is portable. My parents are big on firsthand experiences. We do lots of field trips. Museums. Foreign countries. National parks. They’re big on nature.”

“I’ve always wanted to travel more. Do you speak other languages and stuff?”

Her eyes lit up. “I love languages. I speak pretty fluent French and Spanish. I’m okay at Italian and Portuguese. And I can sort of get by in Russian, Chinese, and a couple others.”

Jason gave a low whistle. “You’ve been to all those places? Italy and China and everywhere?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like you guys have some money.”

“Dad made a lot as a software designer. He’s semiretired. I’m an only child.”

“You were telling how you came here,” the Blind King prompted.

“Right,” Rachel said, raking her fingers through her dark brown hair. “Dad had hired a local guide to take us off the beaten path. He drove us around in a jeep through some amazing country. Have you been to Arches?”

“No. I’ve been to the Grand Canyon.”

“Me too. The Grand Canyon was just a big hole in the ground. Arches and Bryce Canyon seemed much cooler to me. They’re full of these awesome spires and bridges made with stones in all these crazy colors.”

“You should write a travel guide,” Jason said dryly.

“Anyhow, our guide was taking us to some smaller stone arches. The kind you can’t find on maps or drive to on a road. He parked beside an arroyo—that’s what he called a ravine—and we walked from there. The arroyo branched in a couple places, and while we were stopped for a snack at one point, I saw this beautiful blue and gold butterfly. Each wing was nearly the size of my hand. They almost looked metallic.”

“Let me guess the twist ending,” Jason said. “The butterfly swallowed you, and you ended up in Lyrian.”

“Not quite. The butterfly made me curious. I had never seen anything like it, and I thought maybe I had found a new species. After all, we were in the middle of nowhere.”

“I’ve never heard of a North American butterfly like you’re describing,” Jason said, proud to sound official with his zoological knowledge.

“We have them here,” the Blind King remarked. “Go on.”

“I left my parents and the guide and chased after the butterfly. It stayed too far ahead for me to catch up and get a good picture, but I had no trouble following.”

“So then what happened?” Jason asked, taking another bite of meat. The pheasant was quite tender, the crisp brown skin on the edges deliciously seasoned.

“I ended up in front of this natural stone bridge, a really impressive one. The butterfly flew forward under the stone arch and disappeared. One second the big, bright butterfly was in plain view—and the next it was gone. I stood there squinting, figuring it must have flown into the shadow of the arch and landed somewhere.”

“As I told Rachel,” the Blind King commented in his raspy voice, “stone archways have long been a means of conveyance between our worlds. Much more conventional than water horses.”

“You followed the butterfly,” Jason said.

“The instant I passed below the arch, I was somewhere else,” Rachel recounted, her voice quavering at the memory. “The terrain was completely different—a leafy ravine full of gray rocks. I turned around, but the arroyo was gone.”

“Did you try to backtrack?” Jason asked.

She shook her head. “Not at first. I saw the butterfly on the ground, not far ahead of me. Its wings quivered weakly. I crouched beside it and watched it die.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “Then what?”

“I tried to go back,” Rachel said. “Whatever mystical doorway I had passed through was either one-way or only open for a second. I called for my parents. I walked up and down the ravine. I threw rocks. Eventually I decided I had better try to find civilization.”

“She found the secluded cabin of a friend of mine,” the Blind King said.

“It wasn’t far from where I came through,” Rachel said. “The cabin looked primitive but in good shape. I called and knocked, but nobody answered. The door was unlocked. I found a dead old woman inside. I swear I almost lost it. It was too much.”

“Erinda lived in isolation,” the Blind King said, taking a sip of the golden beverage from the carafe. He smacked his lips. “Superior honeymelon juice. Be sure to sample some. Where was I? Oh, yes, I had received an urgent message from Erinda the day before, a cryptic missive about doing her part to save Lyrian. Erinda was something of a spellweaver, you see, and she mentioned that she had been in contact with one of the Giddy Nine.”

“Was she the oracle?” Jason asked, pouring some of the golden liquid into his glass.

The Blind King snorted. “Hardly. But she evidently played a role in the oracle’s designs. Erinda had a fondness for insects. How odd that a Beyonder followed a butterfly through a supernatural portal not far from her cabin on the day she died, all within hours of when young Jason arrived from the Beyond by even less likely means.”

“I spent the rest of the day exploring,” Rachel continued. “I went back to the ravine hoping I could discover a way back to the arroyo. When I couldn’t find a way home, I went back to the cabin and spent the night with the corpse. At least the cabin had provisions.”

“Dorsio and Brin the Gamester went and retrieved her,” the Blind King said. “The message from Erinda had advised me to send trustworthy men to her cottage.”

“The Gamester who lives down the road from here?” Jason asked.

The Blind King nodded. “Another member of my private circle.”

“Brin convinced me to come with them,” Rachel said. “He seemed to believe I had come from another world. He and Dorsio brought me here.”

“And I have been trying to decide what to do with you ever since,” the Blind King said. “I am watched too closely for you to remain here for any duration. Given my past, if the emperor believed I was harboring a Beyonder, it would lead to the end of us all. Rachel, I believe your destiny is entwined with Jason’s.”

“My destiny?” Rachel huffed. “Are you serious? You say it like you mean it.”

The Blind King sighed thoughtfully. “There are some oracles who truly possess the gift of foresight. Some pretend, some guess, but a few are legitimate. Indeed some in my family have wielded this true gift of prescience. It seems the last great prophetess in the world helped instigate your arrival here. Where true oracles are involved, yes, I believe in destiny. Or at least potential destiny. The future is never certain.”

“I’ve always thought fortune-tellers were ridiculous,” Rachel said candidly. “Then again, after coming here, I’m not sure what to believe anymore. Who knows what might be possible? But enough about me. Jason, tell me about this hippopotamus.”

Jason recounted his escapade at the zoo, his arrival at the river, and his failed rescue attempt. Rachel acted incredulous about the hippo, but after Jason pointed out that it was no less plausible than journeying to a new world beneath a stone archway, she listened intently to the rest. The Blind King stopped him before he could relate anything about the Repository of Learning.

“Jason took a detour before joining us here,” the Blind King explained. “The details of this detour are perilous to any who learn them. Jason acquired information that directed him toward a quest that could destroy Maldor.”

“The emperor?” Rachel verified.

The Blind King nodded. “It must all be part of the oracle’s design.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “Are you telling us that everything we do here is already determined?”

“Certainly not,” the Blind King said. “Oracles do not deal in absolutes. They deal in possibilities. The future is always in flux, changing according to the decisions made in the present. Presumably, somewhere in our wide array of possible futures there is a chance that this quest of yours could yield favorable results to those who oppose Maldor. We know nothing more.”

“And you think I’m part of this,” Rachel said.

“The specifics of the prophecy died with Erinda and the Giddy Nine,” the Blind King said. “My best guess is that you two were meant to embark on this quest together. I could be wrong. The choice is yours. The endeavor will be unspeakably dangerous.”



“What if I don’t want to join him?” Rachel asked.

“I would send you away to a farm owned by distant relatives,” the Blind King said. “You would play the role of an orphan brought into the household to help with chores. We would all do our best to hide the fact that you came from the Beyond. Perhaps by lying low and hiding your past, you could eventually build a life here.”

“No, thanks,” Rachel said. “I want to find a way home!”

The Blind King ran a finger around the rim of a glass. His strong hands looked somewhat younger than the color of his hair and beard would indicate. “If you mean to search for a way home, the endeavor will require much travel. The safest way for you to travel would probably be as a coconspirator in a plot to overthrow Maldor.”

“Really?” Rachel asked skeptically.

“Maldor is a complicated ruler. He takes great interest in his enemies, seeking to test them, measure them, and eventually to corrupt or break them. Strange as it may sound, you will meet less resistance on the road if you are part of a known plot against him.”

“And Jason’s plot is known?” Rachel asked.

“Well known,” the Blind King assured her. “Undoubtedly the eye of the emperor is on him. Should you elect to join Jason, the gaze of the emperor will rest upon you as well. As a Beyonder, joining a desperate quest such as this may be your wisest option, as I assume the oracle foresaw.”

Rachel rubbed her temples. “I can’t believe this! Everything keeps getting worse and worse. I had a good life! It made sense!”

“I can’t completely understand how disorienting this must feel,” the Blind King consoled.

“I can,” Jason said. “It wasn’t like I came here looking for a mission. I stumbled across it while hunting for a way home. And I still want to find a way home.”

“I would not blame either of you for being reluctant to adopt this quest as your own,” the Blind King avowed. “You were both drawn here by forces beyond your understanding.”

“For your sake, I’m sorry you’re here, Rachel,” Jason said. “For mine, I’m sort of glad. It’s a relief to talk to somebody who at least knows the Yankees exist.”

Biting her lower lip, Rachel pushed some food around her plate. She took a sip of water.

“Take your time, Rachel,” the Blind King advised. “For the moment the secret Jason has learned remains his burden alone. Enough of your fate has been involuntary. I will not attempt to force this knowledge upon you. Tomorrow you can depart with Jason, sharing his secret, or you can depart for a quiet life on a farm. With Jason you would be constantly on the run, rushing from one peril to the next. On the farm, if we can manage to transport you there undetected, and if you avoid drawing attention, you would have a reasonable chance of living out your days in peace. You have this night to decide.”

“Or there’s option three,” Rachel said. “Hit the road on my own and take my chances.”

“I suppose,” the Blind King said. His tone made it clear he thought it would be foolish.

“And I have no choice,” Jason grumbled.

“Not much choice,” the Blind King agreed. “I suppose you could surrender to the emperor. Otherwise you should pursue the quest. Tonight you will rest under my protection. I will provide you with a room and a bed. On the morrow I will equip you and offer some parting counsel. For the present do your best to relax.”

# GIFTS

A burst of three brisk thumps rapped against the door. Jason awoke, staring up at the underside of a dark blue canopy emblazoned with a golden sunburst, tucked between soft sheets, head cushioned on a feathery pillow. He occupied the room immediately below the Blind King's personal chamber. Two sets of slatted shutters were latched over tall windows, mostly blocking the predawn grayness. Supercool weapons hung on the walls: several swords, a loaded crossbow, a javelin sharpened to a point at both ends, and a pair of bizarre weapons with short wooden handles from which sprouted many sharp, twisting blades of varying length, intricate as Chinese characters.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

Jason stretched. Apparently they wanted him to get an early start. Reluctant to leave his comfortable bed, he kicked off his sheets and crossed to the door, the stone floor chilly beneath his bare soles. After removing the bar from its brackets, he slid both bolts and pulled the thick door open. Dorsio stood on the landing, a short sword strapped to his side. He handed a bundle of clothes to Jason and gestured for him to follow.

"Should I put these on first?" Jason asked.

Dorsio gave a nod.

He dressed hurriedly. The shirt, trousers, and loose vest fit better than the clothing Rachel had received. There were no shoes in the bundle. "Do I just wear my same boots?"

Dorsio nodded again.

Jason laced his boots. Remembering his manners, he hastily straightened the covers on the bed. Despite the instructions the Blind King had given to lock his room, the night had passed uneventfully.

Jason climbed the stairs to the king's room, passing the cook as she descended, a gaunt woman wearing a leather choker, clutching a large wooden spoon in one callused hand. He followed Dorsio to the top, where the attendant unlocked the door.

“Enter,” the Blind King invited.

Jason complied. Remaining on the stairs, Dorsio closed the door. A tray covered with steaming eggs, dark bread, and fat, crisp bacon sat on a low table. Jason took a seat. At an invitation from the king he piled eggs and bacon onto a slice of bread to make a breakfast sandwich.

“This morning you must depart,” the king said. “I will do what I can to help you on your way.”

“Where should I go?” Jason asked after spitting a mouthful of bread and egg into his hand because it had burned his tongue. He was glad the king could not see the unappetizing act.

The Blind King scowled pensively. “I have given the matter much consideration, and I’ve managed to revive a faint memory. I recommend you travel south, well beyond the crossroads, to a place where the road bends east along the top of sea cliffs. At the bend in the road you will leave it, heading farther south until you arrive at a tiny trickle of a stream that seeps away into a crack not far from the brink of the cliffs. Looking down off the precipice near the stream, you will observe a pair of rocks shaped like arrowheads. At low tide jump between those rocks, and swim into the cave at the base of the cliff. A man who dwells inside will give you some of the answers I cannot supply.”

“When is low tide?”

“This time of year it should fall around midday.”

“How high are these cliffs? Won’t I get hurt?”

“The water is deep there. You might drown or be crushed against rocks, but you should survive the fall.”

“Comforting.” Jason had been blowing on his open sandwich. He took a tentative bite. “Will he give me part of the Word?”

The king crinkled his brow. “He might. I recall that a man in the sea cave assisted me in my quest. I do not remember where I obtained the fragments of the Word I collected, although I know some part came from *The Book of Salzared*. Whether the man in the cave knows part of the Word, or can simply offer some guidance, I am unsure. The memory of his location was all I could salvage.”

“How did they erase your memories?”

The Blind King shrugged. “Torture. Toxins. Conditioning. Magic. It is all a miserable blur. I am not quite as old as I appear. I was once a proud, defiant man. The tormentors worked on me until I broke, mind and body. I have

attempted to rehabilitate my body, to some success. Healing my mind has proven to be the greater challenge.”

With his tongue still feeling scalded, Jason finished his flavorless sandwich. He heard boots stomping up the stairs, followed by a firm rap at the door.

“Who seeks admittance?” the Blind King inquired.

“Brin, bearing urgent tidings.”

“Enter.”

A key rattled, and the Gamester came through the door, chest heaving, wearing a hooded cloak. “There has been a murder!”

Jason felt uncertain how to react. He wondered if this was more make-believe.

“Go on,” the king said.

“Francine, daughter of Gordon, has been taken. There was a slaughter at her home.”

“What?” Restrained outrage tightened the king’s voice. Jason leaned forward to the edge of his seat, alerted by the king’s genuine reaction. Did the Gamester mean Franny?

“Dire news, sire, but accurate.”

“Describe the scene.” The king had regained his composure.

“When I arrived, the door hung askew on twisted hinges. The parlor was a disaster. Furniture splintered, everything spattered with gore, tattered bits of fabric clinging to the walls and ceiling.”

“A mangler,” the king stated flatly.

“Assuredly.”

“She owned a boarhound.”

“I found no traces of the animal in the aftermath.”

“Could you identify the victim?”

“Yes.” The Gamester produced a bloody rag from inside his cloak, unfolding it to reveal part of a severed hand wearing a gray, fingerless glove.

“Aster!” Jason blurted.

The Gamester nodded at him. “So it would appear. Your Majesty, I found part of a dismembered hand upon a high shelf. I feel certain the hand belonged to the vagrant Aster, and young Jason seems to recognize it as well.”

“I spoke with Aster on my way here,” Jason recounted, sickened by the news that the vagrant had perished. “He sent his regards.”

The king nodded. “Aster was once a very respectable man. He must have tried to intervene when they came for her. Evidently not all heroic inclinations

had abandoned him. Jason, I take it you spoke with Francine on your way into town?"

A pang of guilt hit Jason. "I did. I didn't know it could endanger her!"

"This atrocity is meant as a message to you, and also to me. Maldor wants you to know he is watching. And he wants me to know what will happen to any who assist you. Brin, please hasten the preparation of provisions for Lord Jason to take upon his journey. And find out whether Rachel has elected to join him. I lament sending her into danger, but no safe choices remain for her. I still expect her best chance for survival is accompanying Jason, but she must reach that decision on her own. Maintain a guard at the foot of these stairs. Keep a close watch on the road."

"As you wish, sire," the Gamester said, bowing stiffly. He closed the door when he left.

"What will happen to Franny?" Jason asked, embarrassed by the catch in his voice.

"Did you mention the Word to her?" the king asked grimly.

"No, of course not. The loremaster warned me not to talk about it. I only discussed it with you because you brought it up."

"Did you mention anything about the repository? Or your status as a Beyonder?"

"None of that," Jason said. "I just asked the way to your castle."

"Then she will probably live, although she might never return to her home. She will be interrogated and reprimanded."

"I can't believe this," Jason murmured.

The king leaned forward. "Heed my words. I now share a lesson learned through a lifetime of sorrowful experience. Maldor possesses sufficient power that when he wants a person dead, with very few exceptions that individual perishes immediately. Strangely, though, the greater threat an adversary poses, the less vigorously Maldor pursues a hasty demise. He toys with his greatest opponents, baits them, studies them, attempts to shatter their spirits, to drive them to utter ruin rather than merely slay them. For this reason I remain alive. No doubt it amuses him to envision me rotting away in a decaying castle, not dead but defeated. A pathetic monarch astride a throne of make-believe."

"What a psycho," Jason mumbled.

The Blind King raised a finger. "However, Maldor deviates from his sadistically inquisitive pattern when a foe fails to abide by his rules. He abhors the dissemination of sensitive information. He detests the recruitment of neutral

parties. It bodes well for you that when Francine is interrogated, she will have no information about the Word or your quest. Had you told her about the Word, I would advise you to hastily gulp down your last meal. Do not take this counsel lightly. If you went around informing every soul you met about *The Book of Salzared*, you and all of the people you had spoken with—and most likely their relatives, friends, and neighbors—would be massacred.”

“But you and I have talked a lot about the Word,” Jason said.

“You have told me nothing I did not already know. Converse all you want with those of us who share the secret bound in living skin. Once you have been marked as an enemy to Maldor, you are actually safest when consorting with his other enemies.”

“Have I brought danger upon you?”

“Undoubtedly. But I would have it no other way. My only remaining purpose of any consequence is advising those who dare to challenge the emperor.”

The door opened silently, and Rachel entered, wearing the same ill-tailored outfit as the day before. Dorsio waited in the doorway behind her.

“Rachel,” the Blind King said, tipping his head toward the door. “I take it you mean to join Jason?”

“For his sake,” she answered. “It didn’t seem like he’d make it far without me.”

“Ouch,” Jason said. “That’s the problem with homeschoolers. They haven’t learned to interact with their peers.”

“Enough bickering,” the Blind King said. “Save your energy for the road. Dorsio, the surrounding countryside remains clear?”

Dorsio snapped his fingers.

“See that we remain undisturbed.”

Dorsio snapped again and exited.

“Now that I’m officially coming,” Rachel said, “what’s the big secret?”

Jason explained about the book and the Word. She listened stoically. The Blind King advised Jason to wait to share the first syllable until he and Rachel were on the road, then repeated his advice about how to avoid provoking Maldor.

“So we’re going on a quest to find a magic word?” Rachel asked in the end. She seemed underwhelmed.

“Maldor was apprenticed to an evil wizard called Zokar,” the Blind King explained. “As a prerequisite to apprenticeship, dark wizards used to force their novices to allow a destructive spell to be woven into their physical makeup. A

key word of Edomic could activate the spell and annihilate them. The practice granted the higher wizard assurance that his pupil would never turn on him.”

“And anyone can say the key word?” Jason checked.

“The key words were designed to be the simplest conceivable activation tools,” the king said. “This gave the mentoring wizard the assurance that he could overcome his apprentice under almost any circumstances. The main protection to the vulnerable pupil was his trust that his master would keep the key word a secret and never use it unfairly.”

“But Zokar shared Maldor’s word,” Rachel concluded.

“Evidently,” the Blind King said. “Zokar must have shared the Word after terminating his relationship with his apprentice. Typically, obscure and slippery words were chosen, to minimize the chances of the destructive spell being triggered accidentally.”

Jason grabbed an extra piece of bacon. “*The Book of Salzared* said that I have to memorize the syllables, but to never say the Word or write it down, or it will be erased from my memory.”

The Blind King gave a nod. “Edomic words of power can only be retained by the most adept, practiced minds. Part of the magic inherent in these key words causes them to be forgotten upon utterance. Learn the syllables, but only combine them mentally. Do not write or speak them in any combined form, or you risk losing them. You will only get a single chance to utter the Word entire, and that must be in the presence of the emperor.”

“You really think this will work?” Rachel asked, taking a piece of bread.

“I have wagered my life, and the lives of many around me, on that certainty,” the Blind King affirmed. “Seek the Word diligently. Hope that for a time Maldor will take interest in you and study you rather than speedily crush you. Beware: Even his gentlest tests can be deadly. And be prepared for the moment when Maldor will come for you in earnest. The closer you get to success, the greater peril you will face. The emperor will not let you succeed. Somehow you must triumph in spite of that.”

“You didn’t,” Rachel pointed out.

“Correct,” the Blind King said wearily. “We can only hope that you will be clever or skillful or lucky where I was not. The way will be grueling, but with the knowledge you now possess, there is no other option—you must proceed.”

Jason nodded, then remembered that the Blind King could not see the affirmation. “We’ll do our best.”

“Good lad. How adept are you at the art of swordplay?”



“Not at all.”

“Have you any weaponry?”

“No.”

“Rachel?”

“Uh, I have my camera. And a canteen.”

“I have some gifts for you.” With a firm shove against the arms of his chair, the Blind King stood and walked over to the headboard of his bed. As he pressed a pair of acorns embossed onto the wood, a panel sprang open, revealing a small compartment. The king removed a couple of articles.

“This poniard is yours now, Jason,” the king said, holding out a small dagger. “Its edge is most keen. If you press this blossom on the hilt and slide it forward, the blade becomes a short-range projectile. It is spring-loaded, commissioned from Brin the Gamester. May it serve you well.”

The Blind King sheathed the dagger, and Jason placed it in a deep pocket of his trousers. “Thank you.”

“I would give you a sword, but openly carrying a weapon you have not mastered is more dangerous than traveling unarmed. Beware men who carry swords. They will know how to use them.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Rachel?” The king held up a crystal sphere, just smaller than a baseball, with a small stone inside. “This mineral is orantium. It combusts when exposed to air or water. Sealed in the sphere with a pure gas the stone is harmless, but shattering the crystal produces a mighty explosion. An ideal tool for destroying manglers. Even if a mangler bests you, with this on your person you will not perish alone.”

A crease appeared between Rachel’s eyebrows. “If it combusts when it’s exposed to air, how did anyone get the mineral in the first place?”

The Blind King cleared his throat. “Long ago, at the fringe of recorded history, orantium was mined from the bowels of Mount Allowat, the only place it was ever found. The day came when the miners reached an enormous vein too dangerous to extract, and they abandoned the project. Over time the method of extracting the mineral was lost, as was the location of the mountain. This sphere is a relic from ancient times, one of a dwindling number of orantium explosives.”

“What if I crack the sphere by accident?” Rachel asked.

“You would be blasted to pieces. But the crystal casing is quite durable. Fling it with considerable force against a hard surface, or the sphere may not rupture.”

The king handed over the globe. "You are very kind," Rachel said.

"As neither of you is a warrior, avoiding confrontations should represent your best hope. Use evasion and persuasion. The knife and orantium are meant as a last resort."

"Live by the sword, die by the sword," Jason said.

"Quite so." The Blind King stroked his beard. "I have an advantage over both of you."

"What?" Rachel asked.

"I know your names. My name is a secret. To all save a few trusted allies I am simply the Blind King. The sharing of my name is no small matter. Many enemies from bygone days would seek their revenge if they knew my location. My beard, my voice, my scars, my premature aging—all of these elements help disguise my true identity. My name is Galloran. The name will open doors. Especially when you claim me as your sponsor. Use my name when you speak to the man in the cave, and with others who share our conspiracy against Maldor. It may bring aid in times of need."

Galloran removed a ring from an inner pocket of his robe and held it out to Jason. "Will this fit?"

Jason slid it on the third finger of his right hand. "Yes."

"It will confirm my sponsorship. My third and final gift. Kneel."

Jason complied. From beneath his shabby robe Galloran drew a magnificent sword, the long blade gleaming like a mirror. He reached forth one hand and laid it on Jason's head to confirm his position, then tapped each shoulder with the blade as he spoke.

"I, Galloran, master of this castle, rightful heir to the throne at Trensicourt, dub thee Lord Jason of Caberton, hereby transmitting all rights and privileges befitting a nobleman of rank and title."

Jason arose, moved by the simple ceremony despite the Blind King's ruined castle, raspy voice, and tarnished crown.

"What about me?" Rachel asked testily.

"You can be my cook," Jason said, unable to resist.

Rachel flushed. "You're going to pay for that one."

Galloran held up a hand. "Tense situations have a way of shortening tempers. Do not misdirect your anxieties. You two only have each other. Your lives depend on getting along."

"Why does he get to be nobility?" Rachel asked with a strained attempt at calmness.

“It is the more believable scenario,” Galloran said. “In Lyrian most titles are held by men. If you had land of your own, Rachel, you would certainly not be on the road without an entourage. It would be wisest to travel as Lady Rachel of Caberton, Jason’s sister. Since your kinship is pretended, I will not formalize the title. Do not share your titles liberally. Keep them secret, as with the ring, using them only in times of need, like a hidden poniard. Lord of Caberton is a vacant office which remains my legal right to bequeath. The ring is your evidence. I fear the manor at Caberton is in greater disrepair than this castle, yet the title may serve you if circumstances force you to deal with other nobles.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“My pleasure.”

“Sorry if I’m acting ungrateful,” Rachel said miserably. “You’re right; I am stressed.”

“I understand,” the Blind King replied.

“Can I be honest with you?” Jason asked.

Galloran folded his hands. “I would not have it otherwise.”

“I’m not sure I’m cut out for something like this. I’m a pretty regular guy. All this stuff you’ve been telling me has almost scared me out of my mind. I don’t think I’m what you’re looking for. You need a real hero.”

Galloran shook his head. “So many misconceptions surround the notion of heroism. Far too many categorize a hero as a champion on the battlefield, a commander of legions, a master of rare talent or ability. Granted, there have been heroes who fit those descriptions. But many men of great evil as well. Heed me. A hero sacrifices for the greater good. A hero is true to his or her conscience. In short, heroism means doing the right thing regardless of the consequences. Although any person could fit that description, very few do. Choose this day to be one of them.”

Jason swallowed. “All right.”

“I’ll try,” Rachel whispered.

“Now, *Lord Jason, Lady Rachel*, the hour of your departure is at hand.”

They descended the stairs together, pausing at Jason’s room so he could collect the remainder of his belongings. He took his wallet and key chain, the cloak and the blanket roll the loremaster had provided, and the small sack of mushrooms and berries. When he grabbed the bundled remains of the bread Franny had supplied, another pang of guilt struck him. He couldn’t wrap his mind around the fact that her home had been invaded, Aster had been killed, and she had been abducted, all just for talking to him! How could anyone

destroy lives so unfairly? He wanted to hit somebody, but the only real target for his frustrated anger was some faceless emperor in a distant castle.

It was hard to resist blaming himself. Images of Aster and Franny bombarded Jason: recent memories, fresh and vivid. He had brought this disaster to their doorstep. As Jason followed the others down the rest of the stairs, he tried to console himself that there was no way he could have foreseen that his innocent conversation would provoke such extreme retaliation.

Dorsio awaited them at the foot of the stairwell, one hand on the hilt of his short sword, a leather satchel in the other. Dipping his head, he handed the satchel to Jason.

“Additional provisions,” said Chandra the cook, approaching to hand Rachel a traveling cloak and a blanket roll of her own. “Safe journey.”

Brin the Gamester jogged into view, halting before the king to report. “Sire, a figure on horseback, accompanied by another on foot, has been spied on the access road approaching the gates.”

“Unsurprising,” the king grunted. “We must make haste. Delay them.” Brin trotted away. With the king’s hand on his shoulder Dorsio led Jason and Rachel out of the audience hall to a place at the rear of the castle where the wall had tumbled inward in a fan of corroded stone blocks.

“Go swiftly,” the king urged. “We will strive to divert any who pursue you. Follow the path. It intersects the road you took out of the hills, Jason, just east of the crossroads. When you reach the road, go west to the crossroads, then south to the sea cave.”

“We will,” Jason said. “Thank you for everything, Your Majesty.”

“Fare thee well, Lord Jason of Caberton. Safe journey, Lady Rachel. Take care of each other. I will do all I can to help from here. May we meet again under friendlier circumstances.”

Dorsio clapped Jason on the shoulder and gave an approving nod. He took one of Rachel’s hands and gave a squeeze.

“Thank you,” Rachel said.

“Hurry,” the Blind King urged. “Try not to let others see you on the road. Use your eyes and ears. Keep hidden whenever possible.”

Jason tromped out of the gap in the wall with Rachel at his side. He didn’t look back. He doubted anyone was watching their departure. And besides, it would do little good to wave to a blind man.

# JUGARD

The day was cooler than the previous one. White clouds crowded the sky, billowy masses suspended high above the countryside, casting huge shadows over the landscape. The dirt path, much narrower than the one leading up to the castle gate, wound down through an orchard, then along a fence across pasturelands.

Jason moved at a good pace, impelled by the likelihood that the rider spotted from the castle was after him. Rachel remained beside him, matching his pace, stealing occasional glances back at the ruined castle.

“Do you think any of this is really happening?” she asked.

“It’s happening,” Jason replied.

Rachel remained quiet for a moment. “Of course you think it’s happening,” she finally said. “You’re just a character in my dream.”

“You wish.”

“I didn’t mean my love interest,” she replied defensively. “You’d have better hair. You’re the character I dreamed up because the rest of the dream was making me homesick.”

“Maybe you’re the character I dreamed up to scare myself awake.”

“That’s not very nice!”

“You made fun of my hair. I like it this way. Short and simple.”

“I don’t mind short. Mine is short.”

“Then what’s wrong with mine?” Jason challenged.

“Maybe we should talk about something else.”

“Like the guy on a horse coming to kill us?”

“It needs more style,” she muttered.

“The horse?”

“Your hair.”

“I forgot to bring my gel when I got eaten by a hippo.”

“I’m sorry. Your hair is fine. I was trying to be funny.”

“I’ll give you points for trying.” Jason sighed. “This isn’t a dream.”

"I know," Rachel said heavily. "I just wish it was."

When the path joined the lane, Jason scanned up and down the length of the road. To the east he could see the rooftops and chimney pots of a small town. In the distance to the west he saw the obelisk marking the crossroads. The lane appeared empty.

Jason and Rachel hurried to the obelisk and turned south. He considered how easily a man on horseback could overtake them. Supposedly their pursuer was accompanied by someone on foot. That might slow him. But what if the horseman rode ahead? Taking his poniard from his pocket, Jason fingered the blossom on the handle that could eject the blade. Hopefully, the Blind King would somehow stall their pursuers.

"You got the cool knife and the ring," Rachel grumbled.

"So what? You got a grenade."

"I can only use mine once. And that's if I don't blow myself up first. I can tell women aren't very respected around here."

"I'm not sure anyone gets much respect around here," Jason replied. "So the only stuff you had when you crossed over to this world was your canteen and your camera?"

"Yeah," Rachel said.

"Digital?"

"No, film. We develop our own photographs."

"I should have guessed."

"My parents have a lot of land," Rachel said. "They have some extra houses and workspaces that they lend out to artists and writers and photographers."

"Wow, and I thought I grew up granola in Colorado. Do you guys have campfires and sing together?"

"It isn't that weird," Rachel said. "I do lots of normal stuff too."

"Like attend school at home? Let me guess, were you most likely to succeed? Best dressed? Class clown? All of the above?"

"Very funny."

"I bet you're in a lot of the yearbook pictures."

She shook her head. "I miss out on having an official yearbook. But we take lots of photos."

"Don't you miss having friends?"

"I have friends!"

"Besides your stuffed animals."

Rachel smacked his shoulder. "I have plenty of friends. Public school isn't the only way to meet people. I'm part of a group of homeschooled kids who do stuff together. A few are oddballs, but most of them are cool and interesting. Plus all the visiting artists, and the kids on the track team, and my cousins."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Jason admitted. "If I could still play baseball and do school at home, I might be sold. Especially if it involved lots of fancy vacations disguised as learning." He tried to imagine how that would work. His family had only taken a few vacations together, none very impressive. His brother and sister were quite a bit older, and his mom and dad had always done their fancy trips without kids. His parents had never really shown as much interest in him as they had in his older siblings. He couldn't imagine them taking the time to homeschool him.

Jason glanced back. "I keep expecting to see enemies attacking from behind."

"I know," Rachel said. "Kind of hard on the nerves. Do you get the feeling our lives might never be normal again?"

Jason pressed his lips together. She had just voiced the thought that had been nagging him ever since the Blind King explained their mission. "Yeah."

They picked up the pace, alternating between jogging and walking. Jason was mildly surprised to find that Rachel could match any pace he set. Apparently she hadn't lied about running track.

They ate lunch and dinner walking, feeding on meat and cheese sandwiches created from provisions in the satchel. While scrabbling through the satchel for his dinner, Jason noticed a drawstring bag. Hefting it, he was surprised to find that the small bag felt fairly heavy. Inside he found little pellets of copper and bronze.

"What are these for?" Jason asked. "Slingshot ammunition?"

"Probably money," Rachel suggested.

"Could we be that lucky?" Jason asked.

"The Blind King wants us to succeed."

"Somebody should tell these guys about coins," Jason muttered, putting the little bag away. "It doesn't seem very convenient to have your cash rolling around."

As time wore on, they walked more than they jogged. Jason's feet felt sore, but Rachel hadn't complained, so he hadn't either. They passed no sign of human life but observed plenty of rodents and birds.

As the sun grew fat and red on the horizon, a moist breeze began to blow in Jason's face. Plodding up a long incline, he debated whether he should fish out

his remaining energy berries. Cresting the rise, he finally saw the sea, a blue-gray immensity stretching to the edge of sight, still at least a few miles off down a long slope.

“Low tide won’t hit until noon tomorrow,” Jason said. “Looks like we’ll have more cover up here than we will down there.”

“The woods really thin out on the far side of this ridge,” Rachel agreed. She crouched and studied the hard-packed dirt lane. “I can see traces of our boots. We should walk down the path a ways, maybe leave it a few times, then double back cross-country. In case they’re tracking us.”

“You’re right,” Jason admitted, thinking of Aster’s fate. “We should probably take precautions.”

Jason followed Rachel farther along the path, stomping his feet. She glanced back at him. “Don’t step harder than you were earlier. It might alert them that we’re making a false trail.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Whenever I escaped from juvie.”

Jason chuckled. “Right. You know, we’ll have to trade off keeping watch tonight.”

She nodded. “Weird that we haven’t seen anybody. Nobody using the road, no houses.”

“Yeah, it’s isolated. I’m going to miss my bed at the castle.”

After leaving the path several times, Rachel gingerly followed an improvised route that took them back up the slope into the woods. She selected a spot a good distance from the road, with plenty of trees and bushes to screen their presence. Despite the cover, the location still afforded a view of the lane.

Following a hasty meal, Jason offered to take the first watch. Bundling himself in cloak and blanket, cushioned by flattened weeds, he rested his back against a tree and fought to stay awake. As the light of day faded, the rhythm of Rachel’s breathing, the chirping of the insects, and the sensory deprivation of the darkness overcame his fears, and Jason sagged into a deep slumber.

\* \* \*

Jason jerked awake. He felt damp. Predawn mist shrouded the landscape, intensifying the morning chill. As he uncurled and stood, his shins felt sore, probably from all the jogging done in boots the day before. The noise of his motion disturbed Rachel. Wiping her bleary eyes, she sat up.

“What time is it?” she asked. “What about my watch? Did you fall asleep?”



“No,” Jason lied. “You looked tired. I wanted to let you rest.”

“Then why do you have leaf prints and smudges of soil on your cheek?” Rachel asked. “Were you on guard with your face in a leaf pile?”

“I didn’t try to fall asleep,” Jason apologized. “It got dark and really boring.”

“Boring is the goal,” Rachel said, pulling her cloak more tightly around her shoulders. “The opposite of boring might be somebody cutting our throats.”

Jason winced. Back home several of his classes had bored him. He’d spent tons of late nights trying to find something on television. Much of the time his life had felt planned for him, lacking real purpose, and his boredom had emphasized the problem. But Rachel was right. Boredom was now their friend.

Jason squinted into the mist. “I can’t see the lane.”

“If somebody is tracking us, the fog should work in our favor,” Rachel pointed out.

“I wonder when the mist showed up?” Jason mused.

“Hard to say,” Rachel said wryly. “We miss that kind of information when we’re both sleeping.”

“Don’t be that way. At least it worked out. Now we’ll be well rested when we throw ourselves off a cliff into the ocean.” He stretched his arms wide and groaned. “Want some breakfast? We should probably get going while we have extra cover from the mist.”

“Okay. Maybe just a bite before we start.”

Jason sorted through their food, selecting some dried meat and tough bread. When he found that the remnants of the mushrooms the loremaster had given him were beginning to smell funny and had fuzzy patches of mold, he threw them out, wondering whether he would regret the loss once their rations ran out.

Munching on bread and meat, Jason and Rachel tramped through dewy undergrowth back to the road, their cloaks wrapped tightly about them. Jason shivered. The damp cold seemed to seep through all layers of clothing.

“Let’s check for hoofprints,” Rachel suggested.

In the growing light, breathing foggy air, Jason searched inexpertly for fresh signs of a horse. “I don’t see anything,” he finally announced.

“Then let’s be extra ready for our enemies to approach from behind,” Rachel replied.

Briskly they followed the lane toward the ocean. After cresting the rise from the day before, the lane wound down to the coast, snaking back and forth to offset the steeper portions of the slope. The farther they descended along the

path, the denser the fog became. Jason threw a stone as far as he could and watched it disappear into grayness long before it thudded against the ground, rustling the brush. Before long he could see only a few paces ahead. At any moment he expected a fearsome horseman to lope out of the murk.

As they approached the cliffs, the view of the ocean returned. Low sunlight spread over the water from off to the left, texturing the surface in striking relief by shadowing the troughs between swells.

“Pretty,” Rachel commented. “But I miss the cover of the fog.”

They reached the point where the road elbowed left, paralleling the cliffs as far as Jason could see. As Galloran had instructed, they abandoned the road, continuing south. They soon reached a gentle trickle of a stream.

The stream flowed toward the cliffs, slurping away into a narrow crack not ten paces from the edge. Unhealthy tufts of scraggly weeds flanked the feeble rivulet.

Jason cautiously approached the rocky brink of the cliff. The view was spectacular. He stood more than seventy feet above the churning surf, at the center of a curving amphitheater of cliffs bordering a wide inlet. At either hand sheer faces of dark stone towered above surging bursts of foamy spray. No reef or shallows slowed the swells as they rose up and flung themselves in frothy explosions against alien formations of rock.

Rachel came up beside him, her stance casual, a hand on one hip. Then she stepped even closer to the edge, leaning forward to gaze straight down. Her proximity to the brink gave Jason chills, but he kept quiet.

“Looks like suicide,” Rachel said, drawing back from the edge.

“Maybe it will look better at low tide,” Jason hoped.

“There will probably just be more rocks poking up,” Rachel said. “You a good swimmer?”

“I’m fine,” Jason said. “I’m no Olympian. How about you?”

“I’m pretty good. I’ve done a fair amount of snorkeling and scuba diving. But no serious cliff diving. This is high.”

Turning, Jason stared back at the slope they had descended, realizing that they commanded a clear view of the lane for miles. At least no manglers or other sinister creatures intent on hacking them into confetti should be able to sneak up on them.

“I guess we wait here for midday,” Jason said, sitting down and settling back against a little wind-warped tree. Hands in his lap, he gazed at the long slope and its serpentine lane.

“Let me guess; you’ll take the first watch? Then we’ll wake up at midnight?”

“I’m not sleepy,” Jason protested.

“Neither am I,” Rachel said, sitting down cross-legged. “So, how do you think we’ll get back up?”

“There must be a way. Maybe the person in the cave knows how.”

“Are we really going to do this? Jump off a cliff and swim into a sea cave? We’ll probably die.”

“What else are we going to do?” Jason asked. “If there were any other option I might take it. But it seems clear that if we abandon this quest for the Word, we’re doomed. I’d rather risk my life than lose it for sure.”

“You believe everything the Blind King told you?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, I think so. It matched what I read in the book, and what I heard from the loremaster.”

“You believe him enough to risk our lives?”

Jason paused. “No. I believe him enough to risk my life. I don’t see why both of us should jump.”

Rachel scratched her arm. “Why do you get to jump? Because you’re the boy?”

“It isn’t a prize; it’s a punishment.”

“It’s something important that needs to be done.”

“Do you just love to argue? If somebody wanted to jump off a cliff instead of me, I’d be relieved.”

“I do want to jump instead of you.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “I’m trying to be nice. And fair. I was the one who read the book. This quest is my fault. Besides, I’m bigger than you, which will give me a better chance of surviving the rough surf.”

The explanation silenced Rachel for a moment. She picked at the small weeds in front of her. “It’s really nice of you to offer,” she finally said. “I can tell you don’t love heights.”

“I don’t like edges,” Jason corrected. “I’m fine if you give me a guardrail or put me in a plane or send me on a roller coaster. Let’s not worry about this for now.” He closed his eyes.

“What exactly is a mangler?” Rachel wondered aloud.

He opened his eyes. “We never really had that explained, did we? I guess something nasty that chops people into sushi. I think we’ll know it when we see it.”

She nodded. "Before we do this, maybe you should tell me the syllable you learned. You know, in case I have to continue alone."

"Are you trying to jinx us? Thanks for the confidence!"

"There's nothing wrong with being prepared for worst-case scenarios."

"You should sell insurance."

She huffed, standing up. "Fine."

"Wow, don't be so touchy."

"You don't have to make fun of everything."

"Maybe we should just enjoy the music of the waves," Jason placated.

She sat back down.

Jason made himself as comfortable as possible against the contorted tree. "The first syllable is 'a.' Just in case."

"Was that so hard?"

Jason grinned, deciding to quit while he was kind of ahead. Rachel certainly wasn't a pushover. She had strong opinions, and little fear of sharing them. A good argument could help pass the time, but Jason found himself wondering whether traveling with Rachel would become annoying. If he were going to meet up with somebody from his world, why couldn't it have been Matt or Tim? They could back him up in a fight, and would be more fun to hang out with. Or if it had to be a girl, why not somebody less obnoxious, like April Knudsen?

The rhythmic crashing of the waves below, like a mighty wind rising and falling with unnatural regularity, lulled him into deep relaxation. Breathing the salt-tinged air, he closed his eyes again.

And woke with a start, Rachel jostling his shoulder. Shadows were small. The sun was high. It was nearly midday. The air was still not warm, though the sun shone brightly.

"Maybe you have narcolepsy," Rachel suggested as he staggered to his feet.

Jason wiped his eyes. "I just love naps."

"Well, warn me before you operate heavy machinery."

Scanning the slope, Jason detected no sign of pursuit. Feeling abashed for having dozed off again, he unlaced his boots and yanked them off.

"What are you doing?" Rachel asked.

"I'm the jumper." Jason proceeded to disrobe until he wore only his boxers—blue with narrow yellow stripes. He reflected that his boxers and boots were now the only clothes in his possession that he had brought from home.

Rachel had turned away. "Not very shy, are you?"

"I'm wearing boxers. They look like swim trunks."

She turned and looked at him. "I can do this."

"You can jump off the next cliff. Don't be stubborn."

"You're the stubborn one," she shot back.

Jason quietly conceded that she had a point. His parents always accused him of being obstinate. At home he often got his way simply by outlasting everyone else.

"We can flip a coin," Rachel said.

"Our coins are pellets."

"No, I have one from our world." She started searching her pockets. "Winner picks who jumps."

"Fine." Shivering, Jason stepped carefully to the edge of the cliff. The sea breeze feathered his cheeks, ruffled his hair. Goose pimples rose all over his body. He folded his arms, rubbing his palms against his sides for warmth.

Far below, the water level had receded. Two rocks shaped like arrowheads stood out clearly now, pointing at each other. To land right between them, he would have to jump outward a good distance.

"Found it," Rachel said behind him. "Heads or tails?"

"Heads." He looked back as she flipped the quarter and caught it.

"Tails," she proclaimed, holding it up with a triumphant grin.

"I lose," Jason said, turning away from her.

"No, wait!"

Swinging his arms forward, he sprang out into empty space, viscera rising within him as his body plummeted downward in a wild acceleration through chill, salty air. The wind of his fall swept over him as the greenish, foamy water came up fast. With his elbow tucked against his chest, he held his nose, straightened his body, and tore through the surface of the water between the two giant arrowheads, his feet barely touching the rocky bottom at the low point of his submergence.

The gentle sting of seawater bothered his vision. He was in a long, narrow pit in the coastal floor, well beneath the churning surface. A couple of nearby sea fans swayed with the current. Vivid anemones clung to the rocks. He swam up out of the trench, angling inward toward the base of the cliff. The closer he got to the surface, the more turbulent the currents became.

His head broke the surface, and he gasped for breath. A half-submerged cave yawned directly before him. A curling swell heaved him in that direction, scraping his shoulder against a rough wall of stone. He stroked madly, bumping a knee against an unyielding face of unseen rock.

The ocean drew him away from the mouth of the cave; then the frothy mass of a breaker heaved him forward out of control. He tucked his head, turning helpless somersaults inside the tumbling rush of water, grimly anticipating the moment his skull would burst against a jagged corner of stone.

When the wave was spent, Jason found himself at the mouth of the cave. He clutched a jutting knob of rock to resist being drawn away as the water withdrew. A fresh influx of roiling spume pushed him beyond the mouth into the cave itself. He could not touch bottom, so he swam fiercely, fading back almost to the mouth before a new breaker shoved him in even deeper.

The cave narrowed. The enclosed space magnified the sounds of the surging sea. He scrabbled for handholds to resist the tide and haul himself farther inward. After he traversed a section so narrow he could almost reach from wall to wall, the cave widened into a spacious grotto. Not much light filtered in from the entrance. In the dimness Jason perceived a still, wiry man seated upon a ledge against the far wall, a good ten feet above the water level.

Finding he could now stand, Jason waded over to the far wall, cautious not to slice his bare soles on the rocky ground. Waist-deep water became ankle-deep. Behind him the ocean roared.

Jason stepped out of the water, too close to the ledge to see the man on top. Regular handholds had been chiseled into the rock. "Hello," Jason called.

No answer. Perhaps the man was asleep. Or dead.

Jason climbed the handholds leading up the sheer face below the ledge. Scents of seawater and stone mingled in his nostrils.

His head cleared the top. The ledge was fairly broad, spanning the entire rear wall of the grotto. The man sat nearby, back to the wall, legs crossed at the ankles, staring at Jason. Tangled gray hair covered his head and face, dangling to his narrow waist. He held a rubbery length of seaweed in his hands.

Jason boosted himself onto the ledge, returning the silent stare.

The man squeezed the seaweed, using both hands to twist it in opposite directions. The action triggered a bioluminescent reaction, bathing the ledge in pale green light.

"Nice cave," Jason said.

The man grunted.

Jason decided to have a staring contest. His eyes began to burn. The man showed no sign of strain. Jason lost.

The man still did not blink. The grave gaze was disconcerting. "I need help finding a word," Jason said.

The man nodded fractionally.

“My name is Jason.”

“I am Jugard.”

“So you can speak.”

The man grunted.

“I was sent by Galloran.”

Jugard’s bushy eyebrows twitched upward.

“He said you helped him long ago.”

A slight nod.

“Will you help me learn the Word to unmake Maldor?”

The man stared. Jason lost the contest a second time.

“You heard me, right?”

The stare persisted. Jugard had obviously heard.

Jason scooted around so his back was against the wall as well. He had asked his question. He would look like a jerk if he kept pushing. Apparently the other man needed time to think about his response. Or perhaps he was crazy. Either way, waiting seemed preferable to coercion. Jason shivered, finally recognizing how cold he was.

Minutes passed. Jason stared at his hands, listened to the echoes of surging waves. He quietly wondered if, somewhere high above, Rachel was worried.

Jason glanced sideways at Jugard. The man had set down his seaweed and was busy untangling his matted beard. Muscles danced in his thin, sinuous arms. Jason returned to contemplating his hands. More time passed. He took the silence as a contest. This time he would not blink. Closing his eyes, he began reviewing the bones of the leg and foot. He had a big anatomy test Friday. No, he had already missed it.

“You are wise for one so young,” Jugard said at last. “Most men cannot abide silence. Some fly into a rage. Some become clowns. Some confess all they know. Silence reveals much. I will assist you, Jason, friend of Galloran.”

“How can you help me?”

“What do you know?”

“The first syllable. And I know not to say the Word unless I’m with Maldor.”

Jugard stopped picking at his beard and started rubbing his ankles. He did not look at Jason. “You are just beginning your search. The Word has six syllables. The fourth is ‘en.’ I do not know the location of the other syllables, but I know of a man in Trensicourt who might be able to help. If he remains alive, Nicholas

should be able to advise you. He once worked closely with Galloran, creating engines of war.”

“Okay, ‘en.’ And Nicholas. Is that all you know?”

“I have dwelled in this cave longer than I can reckon. Most of what I know derives from others who have journeyed here. You are the first in some time. I hope my information remains valid.”

Jason nodded. He already had a third of the Word! And he had a new lead to follow. He had worried that the sea cave might represent a dead end. He visualized the portion of the Word he knew.

## A EN

Jason repeated the name of the contact in Trensicourt.

“That is right,” Jugard confirmed.

“Do you know what a Beyonder is?” Jason asked.

“Of course.”

“I’m a Beyonder.”

The bushy eyebrows twitched again.

“Do you know how I can get home?”

Jugard stared. “I do not. Keep asking your question. There are some who might have answers.”

Jason looked around the chamber of stone. He turned to Jugard with a puzzled expression.

“You wish to know how to get back atop the cliffs.”

Jason nodded.

“Once, the task was not difficult. Beyond a neighboring chamber, long ago, a colleague of Nicholas helped me construct a means for ascending to a point near the cliff tops. Sometime later, not long after Galloran visited me, the neighboring chamber became inhabited by a titan crab. Since that day five men and one woman have visited me. Two tried to swim out. I know they failed because their corpses washed back into my chamber. The other four attempted to dodge past the crab. I beheld their demise.”

“Did any try to kill the crab?”

“Three made an effort to slay the crab once it became clear they would not outrun her. None came close.”

Jason silently lamented not bringing the explosive stone. He had nothing to fight with. “What do you suggest?”



Jugard shrugged. "To better understand, you should view Macroïd."

"Is that the crab?"

"The name I gave her."

"You can tell it's a she?"

"I know crabs."

They climbed down off the shelf. Jugard, clutching the luminous length of seaweed, led Jason to a long vertical crack in the wall on one side of the chamber. It was just wide enough for a man to walk through without turning sideways. "Why doesn't the crab come through into here?"

Jugard faced Jason, the green seaweed casting strange shadows and highlights across his furry countenance. "She is much too big."

Jason's mouth felt dry.

Jugard handed him the seaweed. "Peer cautiously through the crack before you enter the room. The crab is most likely in the water, but make certain. If she is out of sight, pass through the crack and go two steps beyond. You will notice a small gap on the far side of the room. Beyond that gap lies my ascender. Do not attempt to cross. Macroïd will emerge from the water. Be ready. Her speed will astonish you. Retreat when she charges. You should witness her capabilities before you choose your course."

Jason slunk into the crack, shoulders brushing the walls of the narrow way as he crept forward. The cleft ran about six paces before ending abruptly.

Hanging back from the opening, Jason held the seaweed forward, dispelling the darkness in the room beyond. It looked empty. Slowly he eased his head forward, imagining a huge crab waiting at one side of the opening, an enormous claw poised to snap shut on his head as soon as he stuck it out. He peeked quickly and immediately withdrew. Nothing was in sight.

Jason stepped into the chamber. It was maybe twenty yards across. Like the previous chamber, a large portion was submerged in water. On the far side Jason saw the gap Jugard had described. He realized why Jugard had warned him not to make a break for it. With no giant crab in sight it appeared temptingly close. The intervening floor was smooth and largely free of obstacles. It was tempting even with the warning. Maybe the crab was asleep.

At his second step into the chamber the crab erupted out of the salty pool in a single tremendous leap. A geyser of brackish water splashed against the ceiling, spraying the entire length and breadth of the room. In his shock Jason dropped the seaweed, taking an involuntary step backward as he wiped brine from his face.

He gaped in awe at the titan crab. The massive creature was the size of a car, not including a huge pair of claws bigger than public mailboxes. The shiny black armor of its carapace gleamed wetly, reflecting the green luminance of the seaweed. The creature stood at the edge of the water, great claws upraised, snipping open and closed with a harsh shearing sound.

Without warning the crab scuttled toward Jason in a horrifying burst of speed. He lunged back into the crack as the nimble creature sprang, hurtling through the air, black claws flashing. Jason fled through the cleft back to Jugard, pursued by the grating scrape of shell against stone and the shearing snip of eager claws.

Jugard caught hold of Jason's shoulders, steadying him as he tried to stop hyperventilating. "Now you comprehend your peril," Jugard said. "Come."

Without the seaweed the chamber was once again lit only by daylight filtering in from outside. Jason followed Jugard back up to the ledge, where the wiry man squeezed a fresh length of seaweed. This one had a more bluish tint.

"Is there a way to kill the crab?"

"Probably not even with an army. Those claws are razor keen. I watched an excellent sword shatter against the shell."

"I can't imagine surviving a swim out of here."

"You would have to swim a great distance. Those who have tried did not get far."

Jason considered the turbulent coastal waters. He had only survived because the waves had pushed him into the cave. Swimming against them would be suicide. Could he at least shout the syllable up to Rachel? He doubted she could hear him over the roar of the ocean. It might be worth a try. Then she could continue the quest on her own. It wouldn't be fair to leave her stranded and exposed with the horseman after her.

"How do you survive in here?" Jason wondered.

"The sea provides. Fish, shellfish, urchins, kelp. They can all be eaten uncooked. And a trickle of fresh water runs into that basin over there." Jason walked over to where Jugard indicated. At one end of the shelf, water tinkled into a natural basin, slowly overflowing off the shelf into the sea. The fresh trickle had to be a byproduct of the little stream atop the cliff. Unfortunately, the water emerged from a split in the rock the width of his finger—there would be no climbing up that way.

"What should I do?"

“I have no right to say. You are welcome to remain here as long as you choose. The variety is limited, but food and water exist in abundance.”

“None of the others stayed.”

Jugard shrugged his bony shoulders. “I presented them with similar cautions. They were heroes on important quests. They believed that where others had failed, they would succeed.”

Jason returned to the wiry, grizzled man and sat beside him, back against the wall. He rubbed his cheeks, looking for stubble. He hardly had any facial hair. He wondered how long it would take for him and Jugard to look alike.

# MACROID

Someone else is approaching,” Jugard said, disturbing Jason’s reverie. “Were you with anyone?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, standing up. He could see a figure swimming out of the narrow passage into the grotto. “Rachel! Do you need help?”

“I’m okay,” she gasped. “Something’s coming.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure. A mangler, maybe.” She reached the shallows and waded hurriedly toward the ledge, her homespun shirt clinging wetly.

“A mangler couldn’t follow you in here,” Jugard said. “It would sink like a stone.”

Coughing, Rachel climbed the handholds to the ledge. She had removed her vest and shoes. Her shirt and pants dripped copiously.

“I’m Rachel,” she told Jugard.

“Jugard,” the shaggy man responded.

“What happened?” Jason asked.

“I freaked out,” she apologized, trying to wring out her shirt. “Not too long after you jumped, something came tearing down the slope. It ignored the road, racing straight at me. It wasn’t a horseman. It kept low enough that all I could really see was the motion.”

“What did you do?” Jason asked.

“I thought about using the orantium. But I didn’t really know what was coming. I knew it was fast and could keep low. I started to worry I might make a bad throw and miss it. Once it got past the bend in the lane and kept heading straight for me, I panicked.”

“Did you bring the orantium?” Jason asked hopefully.

Rachel shook her head. “I was worried it might detonate when I hit the water. So I stashed it, took off my vest, and jumped. I didn’t have time to think it through.”

“Rough swim?” Jason asked.

She laughed shakily. "It almost killed me." She slapped his chest with the back of her hand. "By the way, I didn't appreciate you cheating after the coin toss. We need to be able to trust each other."

"I had your best interest in mind."

"Whatever followed you is still coming," Jugard announced.

"How do you know?" Jason asked.

"I know the natural sounds of this place," Jugard assured him. "I can hear something snorting and gasping, something bestial."

"I don't see anything yet," Jason said.

"You will," Jugard replied.

Gurgling growls and churning splashes heralded the creature's arrival to the grotto. Jason, Rachel, and Jugard clustered at the front of the ledge to observe as the animal entered the cavern, struggling toward the shallows from the deeper water across the chamber. The beast seemed inept at swimming, its sizable head bobbing in and out of sight. Jugard twisted a short piece of seaweed and tossed it into the water to better illuminate the approaching creature.

"Boarhound," Jugard murmured, astonished.

Rachel backed away from the edge as the oversized bulldog reached the shallows and charged, baying wildly, to the base of the ledge, ten feet below Jason and Jugard. The animal began hopping ferociously, coming within a foot or two of the ledge despite its bulky body and stubby legs. Foam lathered its wide jaws.

"Boarhounds are not typically fond of water," Jugard said. "Do you know this animal?"

"Puggles," Jason said. "I think I saw this boarhound at a woman's house a couple of days ago. I heard she was attacked and captured yesterday."

The dog continued bounding at them tenaciously despite repeated failure. Jugard stared intently. "This animal has been conscripted."

Jason turned to Jugard. "What does that mean?"

Jugard pinched some of his whiskers and started twirling them. "Conscriptors have been known to turn animals to their own uses."

"What are conscriptors?" Rachel asked.

Jugard gave her a bemused look. "You must be a Beyonder as well. Conscriptors recruit for Maldor. They are among his most elite soldiers, trained to raise armies from conquered towns or kingdoms. Some specialize in recruiting animals. This dog knew your scent. A conscriptor has transformed it into an

assassin, warping it until its only purpose became to track you down and slay you.”

“I jumped off a cliff to escape a dog?” Rachel asked bitterly.

“Take another look at the dog,” Jugard invited. “If it had your scent, you made the right choice.”

“We have a conscriptor trailing us?” Jason asked.

Jugard shrugged his bony shoulders. “Possibly not. That may be why he sent the animal. Out in the open this crazed boarhound could have finished both of you.”

Jason stared down at the snarling canine, impressed by the rippling muscles under the short-haired pelt. The black gaping mouth held vicious teeth.

“What do we do now?” Rachel asked.

For the first time Jugard smiled. “The Hand of Providence accompanies you. This potential threat may represent your salvation.”

“How?” Jason asked.

“Bait.”

“What do you mean?” Rachel asked.

“Macroid is attracted to fresh blood like nothing else. Twice I have cut myself accidentally. Both times the crab rushed to the cleft, reaching madly, beating and snipping at the very stone of the cave. The futility of her efforts did not daunt her. She did not desist for hours after the wound was dressed.”

Jason shuddered.

“Noting the thirst for blood, I tried cutting myself once immediately after a man dashed for the ascender. The crab hesitated, but went for the man. Had I been within her reach, however, I have no doubt the crab would have attacked me first.”

“Macroid is a crab?” Rachel asked.

Jason described the colossal crab in the neighboring cavern, explaining how it currently impeded their way to the top of the cliff. Rachel turned to Jugard. “So you think if we wound the dog, and it chases us into Macroid’s cavern, the crab will attack the dog, leaving us time to escape.”

“That is your best chance. It will require perfect timing. No blood must be drawn until after you are in Macroid’s chamber. Otherwise she will block the cleft, and you will find yourselves trapped between crab and boarhound.”

Jason ran a nervous hand through his damp hair. He looked down at the ferocious dog, saddened by the thought of the crab destroying it. “If Puggles follows too far behind, the crab will mutilate us before the dog enters the room.”

Jugard rubbed his palms together. "She may mutilate you regardless. But good timing should improve your chances."

"How do we get the timing right?" Rachel wondered.

Jugard turned his back on them, hands on his hips. He grabbed a wooden spear with a sharp stone tip from against the wall. "I will wound the boarhound once you are through the cleft, then turn it loose."

"How can we restrain the dog?" Jason asked.

First propping the spear against the wall, Jugard gathered up a coiled rope of amber seaweed. He fashioned a knotted loop at one end. "Here is my leash." After examining the length, he secured the other end around a stone protuberance.

They peered over the ledge. Puggles continued to rage up at them, twisting and leaping and scraping its claws against the stone below the shelf. Jugard dangled the loop, slipped it around the dog's thick neck on the first try, and jerked it snug. The dog continued bounding at them, heedless of the rubbery noose.

"I left enough slack for the dog to get close to the cleft. You two will go to the end of the ledge, over by the cleft, and drop down. I will come up behind the dog, slash its hindquarters, and sever the restraining line. The animal should pay me no mind. As the conscriptor desired, it will be fixated on you two. Let me figure out the timing. At my signal your duty is to run as fast as you are able. Don't hesitate. Macroid may be sufficiently quick to get all of you."

Jason could feel his heart hammering.

Jugard squeezed a strand of blue-glowing seaweed and fastened it around Jason's wrist. "You remember what I told you concerning the Word."

Jason recited all Jugard had told him. Rachel listened with wide eyes.

"Very well," Jugard said. "Ready?"

"Now?" Rachel asked.

"Is the crab underwater again?" Jason asked.

Jugard nodded. "Macroid is too bulky to stay out of the water long. I would stake your life on it."

Jason managed a feeble smile.

"Take heart," Jugard said. "You have a real chance. Get into position."

Jason and Rachel walked along the length of the ledge until they reached the wall with the crack in it. Puggles moved with them along the base of the shelf until restrained by the seaweed leash. Jugard skillfully descended the ledge

behind the dog, spear in one hand, stone knife in the other. The dog didn't even glance at him.

The cleft in the wall was about fifteen feet beyond the base of the ledge. Jason turned around, dangled from the shelf, then dropped to the cavern floor. The boarhound snarled in ferocious frustration, testing the elastic limits of the seaweed rope. The effort only tightened the noose, strangling the dog's growls.

Jason could not help feeling like this was happening too quickly. He wished he had more time to get used to the plan. After all, the crab was huge, and it had killed before! Rachel dangled from the ledge, and Jason placed his hands on her slender waist, helping her land lightly. The enraged boarhound retreated a few paces, then rushed forward, stretching the restraint enough to get frighteningly close as Jason and Rachel edged toward the crack. When the dog lost momentum, the seaweed recoiled, dragging the boarhound end over end like a spasmodic fish on a line.

Jason stood at the cleft, trying to prepare his mind. "Wait," Jugard called. "The boarhound is strangling."

Sure enough, the beefy dog had not regained its feet. It thrashed on its back, emitting choked snorts.

"I will sever the rope at the neck, slashing the dog with the same motion. When I spring forward, you run."

"Ladies first," Jason murmured, relieved that his voice didn't betray how tense he felt.

Face rigid with worry, Rachel entered the cleft.

Jugard discarded his spear and moved in close, stone knife poised. He jumped forward, bringing the weapon down in a savage arc. Jason did not see the blow strike. He propelled himself through the cleft in five long strides, and bolted into the chamber of the titan crab, only a pace behind Rachel. The bit of seaweed he had dropped earlier still glowed green on the ground, mingling its light with the blue luminance of his seaweed bracelet.

Water sprayed in his face. Macroïd had been surging up from the water before they had even entered the chamber. Jugard must have drawn blood. As Jason sprinted forward, intent on the gap across the room, the titan crab, after the briefest pause, darted toward him, a massive blur glimpsed in his peripheral vision.

There was nothing Jason could do except run, even though the crab would be on him before he was halfway across the room. Where was the dog? What if it



was too asphyxiated to get up and chase them? What if it was attacking the convenient target of Jugard?

Rachel was fast. Running full speed, fueled by desperation, Jason could barely keep pace with her. When the crab sprang, he would try to dodge, maybe buy Rachel some time.

Deep baying rang harshly behind him. The black crab skidded to a stop. Jason hazarded a glance back. The boarhound was racing into the chamber, gaining ground even as the crab pounced at the bleeding canine, slicing Puggles in half with a lethally timed snip.

Jason stumbled, taking several awkward steps forward before Rachel slowed enough to grab his arm and keep him upright. To fall was to die. The gap loomed before them, slightly wider than the previous cleft. Jason could hear the crab scuttling after them, closing fast. The scuttling stopped. The crab must be airborne! They were almost there.

A tremendous force slammed into his back, pitching Jason forward through the gap. Whether the impact came from outstretched claw or armored body he could not distinguish, but it struck him with the blunt power of a battering ram. He bounced and rolled forward out of control, bare skin colliding with stone. Beside him Rachel tumbled as well. As she lost the momentum of her fall, she scrambled onward. Shouting in pain and fear, Jason rolled deeper into the recess, ignoring the scrapes and bruises on his elbows and knees.

The shearing snip of razor claws rang desperately behind him. Looking back, he saw a black claw reaching into the gap, scissoring open and closed well out of reach. Jason panted, watching in mesmerized horror as the crab returned to the gory remains of the boarhound and began dissecting the corpse in a frenzy.

“Oh my gosh!” Rachel exclaimed, voice trembling. “We almost died. I can’t believe we made it!”

“That was close,” Jason grunted.

“You alive?” The hoarse shout came from across the cavern.

“We made it!” Jason cried out, still trying to fully accept that they were out of danger.

“First since Galloran! Good luck to you. Safe journey.”

“Thank you!” Rachel called.

Jason crawled deeper into the cleft, emerging into a small room with no visible exit and no water. Sunlight filtered in through a tall shaft in the ceiling. He slumped onto his back and closed his eyes, hesitant to examine his injuries.

Shock had dulled the pain, but even so he could feel his skin burning where it had torn, throbbing where it had bruised.

“Are you all right?” Rachel asked, crouching beside him.

“Just banged up,” Jason replied. “How about you?”

“I made a luckier landing,” Rachel said. “Having clothes on must have helped. These pants may not be the most stylish, but they’re made of tough material.”

Suppressing a groan, Jason sat up and began checking his wounds by the light on his wrist. No elbow or knee had escaped abrasions and bruises. One thigh had the largest scrape, beneath where his boxers had torn—a blotchy discolored wound streaked with thin lines of blood and sensitive to the touch. His palms were raw. Thankfully, nothing felt broken. Just sore.

“The scrape on your thigh looks nasty,” Rachel commented.

“Could have been worse,” Jason said, finally beginning to relax. “I could have lost a limb. Or my head.”

“I’ve never seen anything like that crab,” Rachel said. “I thought we were goners. Did you see what it did to that dog? I mean, that was a big, strong dog.”

Jason winced. He didn’t expect to get the image of the dog’s violent death out of his head anytime soon.

“It was probably a good thing,” Rachel consoled. “The conscriptor had turned it into a monster.”

Jason shook his head. “Nothing deserves to die like that.”

“It was disgusting.”

“Thanks, by the way,” Jason said, “for helping me keep my balance.”

Rachel smiled. “I heard you stumble. You might not have fallen. I hope I didn’t slow you down.”

“I probably would have fallen,” Jason admitted. “You pretty much saved my life.”

“What are friends for?”

Jason stood up. “We should keep moving.” He could hear the crab snipping frantically at the narrow gap again, probably drawn by his open wounds. The passageway curved, so Jason could not see Macroid from his current position. He wondered if the dog had already been devoured; then he tried to shut down his imagination.

Jason and Rachel examined the room. Off in one corner a wooden platform attached to a chain dangled perhaps a foot off the ground. An iron lever projected from the wall beside it. Jason crossed to the platform and looked up.

Most of the rocky ceiling was dark, but daylight spilled in through a single tall shaft. The chain from the platform stretched up the center of the shaft, which had to be nearly as high as the cliff. Sunlight came in through an opening in the side near the top. In the lofty sunlight he saw where the barbed chain disappeared into the rocky ceiling.

“A primitive elevator?” Rachel asked, gazing up as well.

“Looks like it,” Jason said. “Should we see if it still works?”

“Give me a second,” Rachel said, lacing her hands behind her head and blowing out air. “I’ve never almost died before. Not really.”

Jason noticed that her eyes looked a little misty. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. No. I don’t know. I mean, a giant man-eating crab? Seriously? What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“A big mess,” Jason agreed. “At least we survived. And we already have a third of the Word.”

She took a shuddering breath. “Way to find the bright side.”

Jason fingered the iron lever. “Think the lever will make the elevator rise?”

“I sure hope so,” Rachel said. “If we have to climb a barbed chain, I might walk back to Galloran and ask to be put on his secret farm.”

“Hop on,” Jason suggested. “I’ll lean over and pull the lever.”

“I’ll throw the lever,” Rachel corrected. “I should do something.”

Jason almost argued, but stopped himself. “Fine. Then we’ll be even.”

“No. I still jump off the next cliff.”

“I’m hoping we’re finished with cliffs.”

“You know what I mean. I’ll take the next big risk.”

“I really was trying to be nice.”

She studied him skeptically. “I think it also had a lot to do with getting your own way. If we want to succeed, we need to be able to trust each other. I can be stubborn too. But we need to be teammates.”

“You’re right that I like getting my way,” Jason admitted. “But sometimes stubbornness can be a good thing. Like when Coach Bennion tried to quit.”

“Who? What?”

“I was in seventh grade, playing baseball with a club team. Coach Bennion was an assistant. He really helped me with my swing. Anyhow, our real coach was very strict. One day he had to go out of town, so Coach Bennion was running practice. Bennion was more laid back, and a bunch of the guys started goofing off, since Bennion wasn’t much of an enforcer.”

“Were you one of those guys?” Rachel asked.

“We were all guilty. Bennion tried to put his foot down, but we smelled weakness, and some of the guys talked back to him. I’d never seen Bennion mad, but his face went red, and he told us he was done; we could coach ourselves. I felt horrible. I followed him off the field, apologizing and telling him we’d do whatever he wanted to make it up to him. He told me to run a hundred laps. He wasn’t being serious. He was just trying to get rid of me. He got in his car and left.”

“And you ran a hundred laps?” Rachel asked.

“Most of the other players went home. A few ran part of the way. But I ran a hundred laps. I mean, I walked part of it. When my mom came to pick me up, I explained what had happened, and she let me keep going. It took until after midnight. Somehow Coach Bennion heard. And he decided not to quit.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Rachel said.

“Being stubborn can be good!”

“Not if it makes you a bully. I’ll never be able to trust you during a coin toss.”

“True, I may do something terrible like risk my life instead of yours.”

“You had good intentions,” Rachel acknowledged. “It was even sweet. But with the kind of danger we’re in, trust matters a lot.”

Jason folded his arms. “Okay. I’ll make you a deal. Next time instead of taking matters into my own hands, I’ll argue until you give up.”

“That would be better. But don’t count on me always giving up.”

Jason stepped onto the platform. Splintered and rotting, less than three feet square, the planks thankfully felt solid. Rachel climbed on as well, gripping the heavy chain below where the barbed wire links started as the platform gently swayed.

“Should we do this?” Jason asked.

“I’m ready,” Rachel confirmed, leaning over and placing a hand on the lever.

“We don’t know how this will work,” Jason warned. “Might be a rough ride.”

“I’ll hold on tight. You do the same.” She pulled the lever and quickly gripped the chain with both hands. A tumbling sound rattled inside the walls of the cavern, and the platform started rising.

The chain and platform hauled Jason and Rachel upward, accelerating alarmingly, clattering ever louder as the speed of the ascent increased. Jason squeezed the chain. Pulleys shrieked. The chain vibrated. Near the top the speed decreased. For a moment the chain slackened in his hands as inertia continued to carry them upward. After they reached the weightless apex of their

climb, gravity took over, and they fell until the chain jerked tight again with bone-wrenching abruptness, nearly breaking Jason's desperate hold.

Jason and Rachel stood face to face, separated only by the chain. Her eyes were shut. The platform pendulomed calmly in a weird silence broken only by the dreamy sounds of the surf. Glancing down, Jason beheld the dizzying drop to the stone floor below.

Rachel opened her eyes. "Are we alive?"

"For now."

"That went faster than I expected."

Jason heard a clicking sound. He noticed a simple iron dial on the wall, like the hand of a clock. It had pointed upward at first, but it was turning downward as the clicking continued.

"I think we have a time limit," Jason said, jutting his chin at the dial.

A large, irregular opening in the wall of the shaft beside them overlooked the ocean. The afternoon sun shone down on the ranks of approaching swells.

"Should we pump?" Rachel asked.

Jason nodded.

Synchronizing their efforts, Jason and Rachel began to lean backward and forward, swinging the platform in the direction of the opening. The clicking continued as the dial passed the three o'clock position. Before long Jason kicked out a leg and hooked his foot against the side of the opening. Rachel hopped off the platform to the narrow shelf. Bracing herself against the side of the opening, she steadied Jason as he released the chain and stepped onto the shelf beside her.

They stood high on the cliff face. A small flock of gray gulls hung motionless, gliding into the breeze. A few worn handholds led up to the top.

When the dial reached six o'clock, another tumbling sound came from within the walls of the rocky shaft, and the platform rapidly descended. Once the platform had reached the bottom, the dial reset, pointing upward. Staring at the barbed links of the chain, Jason was glad he didn't have to descend this way. He looked up the final portion of the cliff face. "I guess we climb."

"It isn't far," Rachel encouraged. "It looks easy."

"After you."

Rachel reached for the first handhold and started up the remainder of the rocky face. After taking a few seconds to steady himself, Jason followed, the sea breeze tickling his naked back. Teeth chattering, he tried not to think about the drop behind him, or to heed the churning surf far below. By focusing on finding

secure places to put his hands and feet, he was soon pulling himself over the lip of the cliff.

Standing, Jason scanned the area. The trickling stream lay at least fifty yards off to one side. Rachel was jogging toward where they had left their gear. Nobody else was in sight. His clothes lay scattered around the bush where he had stashed them. Jason ran to catch up to Rachel.

Crouching near the bush, she held up the crystal globe with the orantium inside. "Safe and sound."

"Looks like Puggles chewed on my clothes."

"He was probably excited to get a full dose of your scent. At least he left our gear alone."

Jason collected his clothes, fingering spots where they had been torn or punctured by boarhound teeth. It felt good to put on clothes and wrap up in his cloak. His boxers only retained a trace of dampness.

"Are you cold?" Jason asked.

She had bundled up in her cloak. "Not with my cloak on. My clothes are still damp, so I was feeling that wind."

Jason surveyed the area. "I don't see anybody else."

"We should take advantage of the daylight while it lasts," Rachel said. "Get away from here, find a place to camp."

"We should have asked for directions to Trensicourt," Jason said.

"We'll keep following the road," Rachel replied. "It has to lead somewhere. Eventually we'll find someone who can tell us."

They walked back to the road, and began hiking eastward along the cliffs. Gazing back, Jason felt immense relief to have the ordeal of the sea cave behind him.

"Can you believe we survived?" Jason asked after they had been walking for some time.

"I know . . . Once the boarhound showed up, everything happened so fast," Rachel responded. "Now all I can think about is how close we came to ending up just like Puggles."

Afternoon dwindled to twilight, and twilight deepened toward night. They found shelter in a recessed thicket. After a hasty meal Rachel insisted on taking the first watch.

"I won't fall asleep," Jason promised. "I had a big nap, and you didn't."

Rachel eyed him warily. "Are you sure? If we both fall asleep, we might wake up dead."

“We probably wouldn’t wake up. We’d just be dead.”

“No, I think you’d wake up just long enough to feel incredible pain and realize the shame of your failure.”

Jason chuckled darkly. He raised his right hand. “I’ll stay awake. I promise.” His mind flashed back to the image of Macroid tearing apart the boarhound, and he gave his head a shake. He couldn’t let himself think about what either creature would have done to him and Rachel if given the chance. “I’ve been scared straight,” he reassured her.

“Let’s decide on a punishment if either of us dozes. You know, extra motivation.”

“Besides a possible death penalty?” Jason paused, then smiled. “How about whoever messes up has to smell the other person’s socks?”

Rachel raised her eyebrows and cocked her head. “Not bad. I would have a much smellier punishment than you, but I’m not going to mess up. Okay, here it is—whoever naps while on watch has to smell the other person’s sock *and* stick it in their mouth.”

“You’re disgusting!”

“The punishment needs to be brutal, or it will be worthless. Remember, our lives are at stake.”

Jason sighed. “Fine. I’m not going to mess up either. If you want to eat my socks, that’s your business.”

“Is it official? Deal?”

“Deal.”

# TARK

Three days later, in the early afternoon, Jason and Rachel reached the area where the peninsula joined the mainland. The cliffs had leveled to a beach of silvery sand that mirrored the sky when moistened by waves. An oval, narrow-mouthed bay reached inland from where the peninsula and the mainland met. Beyond the mouth of the inlet desolate beaches stretched southward to the horizon.

Ever since the sea cave, Jason had remained wide awake during his watches, and he had failed to catch Rachel napping. They had felt tense on the road, since many expanses had offered little cover. Nevertheless the days had passed calmly, with no frenzied dogs, horrible manglers, or even fellow travelers passing them on the road. Their food supply had steadily dwindled however, leaving them with only enough for another day or two.

As the road meandered toward the rear of the bay, a fishing village came into view, huddled near the water. A sizable wharf with many docks projecting into the inlet stood devoid of any vessel bigger than a rowboat. A few small crafts floated in the calm harbor, rocking as fishermen slung nets. Two men sat at the end of a worn dock, holding long fishing poles and talking.

The houses in town were boxy structures painted in fading colors. Most of them looked to have been constructed from driftwood and flotsam. On many sagging porches, crates and casks served as tables and stools. Plain canvas curtains hung in malformed windows. Seashells or wildflowers in colored bottles invariably decorated the sills. Atop one house a figurehead of a plump mermaid, paint peeling, leaned out over the yard. A lazy mood pervaded the town. Few people walked the street—those who did seemed to wander.

One structure in town stood out from the rest—a wide, round building with a shallowly sloped conical roof. It drew attention because it ponderously rotated like an overgrown carousel. The bizarre rotunda sat high on a slope, the farthest structure from the water.

Jason glanced at Rachel. “Our first town,” he said quietly.



“It’s almost weird to see people.”

“Nobody stares,” Jason said, “but everybody glances.”

“They seem wary,” Rachel said. “Should we check out the spinning building?” Jason nodded.

Through streets powdered with orange dust they walked up to the odd edifice. A freestanding sign posted out front dubbed the building THE TAVERN-GO-ROUND. Up close the walls whirled by fast enough that Jason wondered how anyone came or went. Since laying his eyes on the peculiar structure, he had not yet noticed it stop. A platform with a few steps led up to the moving wall. The door came by. A square-faced man leaning out called, “You want in?”

“Yes!” Jason shouted, mounting the platform.

The man and the door spun out of sight. When he came around again, wind ruffling his hair, the man held a meaty arm outstretched. Jason caught hold, and the man swung him through the portal.

“The lady also, I expect?” the man asked.

“Yes, please.”

Inside, Jason found a single large common room, with a circular bar curved around the center. Tables and chairs were fixed to the floor. Rafters strewn with glowing kelp added a turquoise radiance to the sunlight flashing through the moving windows.

Only a few patrons sat at tables, a few more at the bar. Two of the men seated at tables were dressed as soldiers. A pair of barmaids navigated the room with trays, leaning expertly to keep balanced. Here by the door the outward pull was difficult to resist.

Rachel came through the door, supported by the square-faced man. “Look at this place,” she murmured.

“I’m surprised there isn’t more puke on the floor,” Jason mumbled back. He strode to the bar, noticing how the pull lessened the closer he came to the center of the room. Rachel joined him at the bar, where the sensation was minimal.

“What can I do for you? I’m Kerny.” The bartender, a lanky man with a huge overbite and hair visible in his ears, introduced himself.

“Why is this place spinning?” Jason asked.

Kerny blinked. “An underground river turns a wheel far below us.”

“Does it ever stop?” Rachel asked.

“Only if the river does. The speed varies with the season. We’re going round pretty good right now. Takes some folks a little time to get accustomed, like

earning your sea legs. The Tavern-Go-Round put us on the map. Back when maps were legal.”

Kerny turned to a man squatting on a nearby stool. The man mumbled something, pulled a copper pellet from his pocket, and handed it to Kerny. Jason began rummaging through his satchel.

“What food do you serve?” Jason asked, after Kerny had placed a bowl of stew before the man.

“All kinds of seafood. Best we serve is puckerlies. We keep them alive in a tank. You ever had puckerlies?”

“No,” Jason said.

“Nothing beats a platter of puckerlies served live.”

“How much?”

“Three and a half drooma. But worth it.”

“Did that guy just pay a drooma for that stew?” Rachel verified.

“Yeah. It’s really hearty.”

Jason and Rachel glanced at each other indecisively. At least Jason now knew that the copper balls were each a drooma. The bronze ones would hopefully be worth more.

“Can’t we get parasites from raw seafood?” Rachel asked the bartender.

“Not every puckerly is fit to serve,” Kerny said. “We’re selective. We don’t get complaints.”

“Haven’t you had raw fish?” Jason asked Rachel. “You seem like the type who would eat sushi.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Of course I’ve had sushi. How it’s prepared matters a lot.”

“How’s this,” Kerny offered, clapping his hands down on the bar. “I’ll let you each sample a puckerly. If you like them, order the platter. Agreed?”

“Sure.” Jason said.

Kerny returned quickly. In each hand he held a black thimble-shaped shell roughly the size of a plum. Jason accepted one and peered at the squirming, multicolored tissue inside. Rachel was right that raw seafood could be dangerous. He remembered his biology teacher expounding on the perils of consuming raw fish. Jason glanced at Rachel. “Ladies first.”

She gave him a snotty grin. “You’re such a gentleman when it’s convenient. I vote you be the guinea pig.”

Jason was acutely aware that Kerny was waiting and listening. Now was not the time to argue. Mutely dreading the unseen parasites about to turn his body

into their vacation resort, Jason raised the shell to his lips.

“Squirt a little pulpa oil in there to loosen it up,” Kerny interrupted. “Otherwise you’ll have to suck like a tube-billed mud strainer.” The bartender held out a glass vial with a tiny mouth and inky blue liquid inside.

Jason tipped the vial above the puckerly, wrinkling his nose as the colorful flesh writhed at the contact from the dark drops. Tossing his head back, he dumped the contents of the shell into his mouth, disturbed that it kept squirming.

The texture was like raw egg yolk, the flavor slightly salty, richer than any seafood he had ever tasted. He chewed briefly, then swallowed, the slimy mass coating his throat on the way down.

“What do you think?” Kerny asked.

“Really good,” Jason said, surprised.

“Honestly?” Rachel asked.

“Try it,” Jason challenged.

Rachel dripped some oil into her shell, then downed the contents. Her expression brightened. “We’ll take a platter.”

Just then a man jostled into Jason from behind. Turning, he saw a short, stocky fellow who had been seated at a table near the door. The man had thick black hair and dense stubble on his face. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled back over hairy forearms bulging with muscle.

“I’ll have the chowder,” he growled in a deep voice.

“Not until you bring in some money or wash some dishes,” Kerny responded, overly articulating his words. The bartender glanced apologetically at Jason.

“I’m not good enough to wash dishes,” the man blubbered in despair. “I’m not good enough for chowder. Sorry to bother.” He wheeled around and plopped down at a nearby table, laying his face on folded arms.

“What’s his problem?” Rachel asked softly.

Kerny shook his head. “He’s depressed and dizzy. Nobody should sit near the outer wall when we’re spinning this briskly. I extended him some credit, but there are limits to what a person can do. I pity him for his mishap, but I can’t let him bankrupt me.”

“What mishap?” Jason wondered.

“Where have you been? He’s the sole survivor of the Giddy Nine. Poor sap.”

Jason whirled. So somebody did jump from the raft! His rescue attempt had not been a total failure. He felt a rush of relief knowing he’d saved at least one person’s life.

“Will you take your food at the bar or at a table?” Kerny asked.

Jason turned back. “At a table. And I’ll buy that man some chowder.”

“Suit yourself. What will you and the young lady drink?”

“Water,” Jason said.

The bartender shrugged and moved away.

“Notice he didn’t ask me what I wanted,” Rachel whispered.

“Now is not the time to discuss women’s rights,” Jason whispered back. “Did you want chowder too?”

“Water is fine. But I wanted to be asked.”

Jason sat down beside the man he had rescued. Rachel sat across from them. “I’m Jason,” he said. “This is Rachel.”

“Tark,” the man replied in his gravelly voice, not looking up.

“I ordered you some chowder.”

Tark raised his head, smiling. He leaned back as he looked at Jason, as if trying to bring him into focus. “That was right gentlemanly of you.”

“No problem. I heard about your friends.”

“They were the lucky ones,” Tark moaned, clutching his hair.

“But didn’t they die?” Rachel asked.

“Like I was supposed to.”

Jason tried to cover his surprise and confusion. The one person he’d saved was devastated at having survived? He cleared his throat. “So, uh, what instrument did you play?”

Tark eyed him. “You aren’t from hereabout.”

“We come from far off.”

“I play the sousalax.”

“What is that?” Rachel asked.

Tark huffed. “Merely the largest of all lung-driven instruments. Only six or seven men along the coast have the capacity to sound it properly. Away north they use the instrument to summon walruses and sea elephants.”

“That sounds handy,” Jason said, sharing a small smile with Rachel.

Tark nodded obliviously. “I was supposed to play to the end. The sousalax lays the foundation for the other instruments. You know? And it was more than that. Listen, this stays between us. Simeon, our leader, had been absent a long while. He had a habit of going on excursions. One day Simeon shows up claiming a prophetess told him if we floated down the river to the waterfall playing music, we would summon a hero to help depose Maldor. He had an exact date and time in mind. At first we thought he was having fun with us, but

he just kept staring, grim as a widow on her anniversary. We discussed the idea a long while, and eventually came to a unanimous accord. I mean, what do we need today more than a real hero? Not these fakers looking for a free ride to Harthenham—I mean the kind of heroes we sing about, the kind who actually stand for something. Simeon convinced us to play right up to the end and summon a hero by our sacrifice.” Tears brimmed in his eyes. “But I reneged.”

A barmaid approached and laid down a platter of puckerlies beside two tall glasses of water and a wooden bowl of chunky chowder. “Don’t let him get started,” she warned Jason. “You’ll be trapped here all night with him repeating the same sorry story.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Jason said. He turned back to Tark. “Go on.”

Tark raised the bowl to his lips, took a long sip, wiped his mouth, and sighed contentedly. Jason dripped some pulpa oil onto a puckerly and swallowed it. Rachel grabbed a puckerly as well.

“It was all the fault of that sadist who fired the rescue arrow,” Tark resumed, gazing at his chowder. Jason stiffened, biting his lip. “We were all resolved to our course of action until a chance for escape thrust itself upon us. With the arrival of that line to shore our determination slackened.

“The arrow took Stilus through the shoulder. Funny thing, he had been the one most opposed to the idea of our sacrifice. It took a good deal of cajoling to convince him. Old Stilus was superstitious, you see. I’d wager he took the arrow for a sign he’d been right all along. No sooner had he fallen than he began wrapping the line in a figure eight around one of the cleats. Stilus never did have much luck. I suppose he thought he was doing the right thing, trying to save us.

“When the boat started swinging in to shore, a bunch of us assumed we would be saved whether we liked it or not. A few kept playing, but most of us, myself included, began stripping away our bindings. We had lashed ourselves in place, you see, so we could keep playing through the rough water. By the time we collided with the bank, even the few folks still playing were having second thoughts. Our chance to survive was so near. I jumped to shore the same instant the line was severed, and found myself alone, the sole defector, watching my comrades float away.”

Tark sniffed and ran the back of his hand across his nostrils. “By that time everyone thought they would be saved. I saw it in their eyes. Because of that hope of survival they experienced true terror as they reembarked toward the

falls. Most couldn't play their instruments, either out of fear or because they had unlashd themselves and toppled over."

His voice became painfully intense. "What should have been a proud occasion of willful self-sacrifice degenerated into a pathetic farce where a raft full of cowering musicians plunged frantically to their deaths. Gelpha got off a blast on the clarinet. And some brave soul crashed the cymbals."

Jason felt a growing sense of horror, each word of Tark's like a punch to his gut. He'd only tried to help, and he'd caused so much suffering. How could he ever make up for it?

Tears leaked down Tark's face. He took a hasty sip of chowder.

"That was my responsibility. I was to crash the cymbals at the end of the finale. Not only did I fail, but some poor terrified soul covered my mistake."

He sobbed, banging a fist against the table. Then he wiped his nose against his shoulder. It took a moment before he went on.

"Afterward people acted like they were glad to see me, happy I had cheated death. But it was an act. Soon I understood the incident had branded me a coward and a mutineer. So I left. There was no place for the Giddy One among those people. I considered returning to the mines. I was an able miner once. But I felt too low even for that. You see, no hero appeared after my friends plunged off the falls. The prophecy went unfulfilled. And for the rest of my days I'll be burdened with the knowledge that it was my fault. Nobody will ever know whether the prophecy could have come true, because I abandoned the sacrifice. The Giddy Nine were supposed to go over those falls. Instead, eight frightened musicians plunged to their deaths, leaving one wretched craven behind."

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," Rachel consoled.

"Right," Tark huffed in disgust. "I should congratulate myself for betraying my friends and protecting the emperor. Suicide has tempted me. But I resolved that since I was not man enough to lose my life among friends, I don't deserve to be coward enough to take my life on my own. So now I am a wanderer. A vagabond whose sousalax rests upon the ocean floor, probably inhabited by a giant transient crab."

"That's—it's awful," Jason said. He opened his mouth to form some further expression of sympathy, but he couldn't speak through the knot in his stomach. Could he possibly be the hero these musicians had summoned? Galloran had made it sound like anyone, even some kid from the suburbs, could become a hero. Hearing in detail the sacrifice these nine people had made just to bring a

hero to Lyrian was overwhelming. It filled Jason with a sudden, intense desire to actually be the hero they needed. But was he capable of that?

“I wish I could find the lowlife who shot that arrow,” Tark grated, fists clenched. “He’s the one who ruined our sacrifice. Without his interference I would have remained true to our cause. Paying him back is my sole remaining purpose.”

Rachel and Jason exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

“What does he look like?” Jason asked.

Tark eyed him. “By the description I got, he looks a bit like you. Tall. Sandy hair.”

Tark snorted, finished his chowder, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Until the day I die I’ll be watching for him.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t target the poor guy who shot the arrow,” Rachel blurted out.

“Why not?” Tark barked.

“He was probably just trying to help,” Rachel said weakly.

Jason bowed his head. “I think we all know who the real villain is,” he muttered.

Tark eyed Jason narrowly. “Maldor,” he mouthed, considering the idea.

“If you want to lose your life doing something useful, go after him,” Jason said, keeping his voice low. “That would be the best way to honor the sacrifice your friends made. Who knows? Maybe you are the hero they were trying to summon.”

Tark sat up straighter, eyes clearing. “I think you’re onto something. What could be more fitting?” He pulled a heavy, saw-toothed knife from his waistband and stuck it fiercely into the tabletop.

Jason stared at the imposing blade in silence.

Tark stood up, stroking his chin. “Mark my words: I may not have died, but my life ended on those falls, so I have nothing to fear. Like a ghost I will stalk Maldor and his minions.” He furtively glanced to see if anyone had overheard him. “Keep this conversation between the three of us. We never met. Good luck to you, friend Jason.” He slapped Jason on the shoulder. “You have revived me.”

Tark sheathed his knife and marched to the door. He tumbled out with help from the square-faced man.

Jason and Rachel each picked up another puckerly. As Jason sipped the squirming flesh, he thought about the heavy knife. Up until a minute ago it had been destined to slit his throat. He hoped Tark’s resolve held. Although he was

haunted by Tark's story of those final moments at the waterfall, he wasn't ready to die to make amends.

Jason finished his share of the puckerlies, and Rachel did likewise. They grew on him more with each he ate. After his last swallow he leaned back, satisfied, relishing the filmy residue lining his mouth. A truly delightful aftertaste.

The barmaid came back.

"What do I owe?" Jason inquired.

"Four drooma."

Jason pulled a bronze pellet from his pouch. "What's this worth?"

"Five," she said, as if she suspected he was teasing her.

"Here you go. Keep the change."

She stared at him.

"What?" Jason asked.

A smile spread across her face. "Thank you very much." She sounded so sincere, Jason decided that people in Hippoland must be lousy tippers. Immediately she went over to Kerny, talking excitedly and glancing toward Jason.

"Hey, big spender," Rachel hissed. "You still with me?"

"I was just tipping. Twenty percent is pretty standard where we're from."

"For the record you tipped twenty-five," Rachel said. "It doesn't matter. We should probably get going."

Jason turned to face the door. "Did we just send Tark to his death?" he murmured.

"Later," Rachel whispered.

"We probably did," Jason said. "He seemed like he was in the mood to do something stupid. I guess it beats getting that huge knife through our backs some dark night."

Rachel stood up.

Kerny hurried over, as if worried they would leave without talking to him. "How were they?"

"Delicious," Rachel said. "You know your seafood."

Kerny gave Jason an awkward glance, as if surprised Rachel had spoken first.

"She gets excited about her food," Jason quipped, earning a grin from Kerny. Rachel's lips compressed into a thin line. "And she was right. Puckerlies were a great suggestion—I have a new favorite meal. By the way, do you know where Trensicourt is located?"

Kerny steepled his eyebrows, forehead wrinkling. "Away inland a good ways."



“Do you know specifically?” Jason asked.

“Can’t say I do. I’ve heard of the place, naturally. Never made it out that way.”

“Do you know anyone who could tell us how to get there?”

Kerny scratched his head. “I doubt anyone in town could tell you. You know how travel has dwindled. Not too wise these days, what with folks disappearing and such. No offense. I’m sure you know your business. Say, do you need a place for the night?”

“Maybe,” Jason said, glancing at Rachel, who gave an infinitesimal shrug.

“My mother runs a small inn,” Kerny said. “Only rooms for hire in town. Good price, nine drooma, and lodging comes with breakfast.”

Rachel offered Jason no clues to her opinion. He supposed it would be nice to have a bed. The last few nights had been chilly, waking up in fog. “I’ll take you up on that. But we’ll need two rooms.”

Kerny raised his eyebrows.

“She’s my sister,” Jason explained.

Understanding dawned on the bartender’s face. “Two rooms, you say? Might elevate the price to twelve.”

“That should work,” Jason agreed.

“Gerta,” Kerny called, removing his apron. The young woman who had served them hustled over. “Watch the bar. I want to escort these good people personally.”

# NED

The square-faced man helped them out the door. They landed rolling on a long mattress stuffed with straw. Kerny used his momentum to somersault expertly to his feet, then gave Jason and Rachel a hand up.

They walked together down the dusty road into town.

Kerny waved at a couple of people they passed. A tall man with curly orange hair and more freckles than skin came up to them, wearing what looked like a long sack with holes cut for his head and arms, the rough material dangling almost to his knees. His elbows were the widest part of his thin, speckled arms. He wore a black leather glove on one hand and no shoes. Even without shoes he stood a few inches taller than Jason. The stranger walked uncomfortably close to them.

Kerny steered Jason and Rachel away from the man. "That one's not well," he muttered.

"Who are your friends?" the stranger asked, following them, sniffing.

"They're none of your business, Ned."

"Sure of that, barkeep?" Licking his chapped lips, the tall man came up right beside Jason, matching him stride for stride.

Kerny wormed between Ned and Jason. "Shove off, Ned."

Ned puckered his lips. "Not yet. Share the secret first. Who are the outsiders?"

"My guests," Kerny growled. "Dignified visitors."

"Don't look dignified," Ned remarked. "They look barely grown. They been sleeping outside."

"Enough!" Kerny exclaimed, making Rachel flinch. "Shove off!"

Ned stopped trailing them, and Kerny led Jason and Rachel to one of the largest houses in town, right on the water. The residence stood up in the air on tall pilings. They climbed a coarse rope ladder up to the porch. A short woman with her gray hair knotted in a bun came to the door.

“I brought you customers,” Kerny said hurriedly. “This is Jason and his sister, Rachel. They’re staying the night. Twelve drooma for two rooms.”

The old woman’s eyes widened briefly. She regained her composure quickly, smiling kindly, but not before Jason recognized they were paying more than usual for the rooms. Jason considered haggling, then reconsidered, since he had already informally agreed to the price. Kerny left, and the old woman escorted them to a pair of small, neighboring rooms. In Jason’s room a wide canvas hammock stretched from wall to wall. A trunk with a big lock sat in one corner. Nets hung over the window instead of curtains, partially impeding the view of the harbor.

The old woman gave Jason the key to the trunk and told him he could stow his belongings there. Then she took Rachel next door. After the old woman finished, Jason entered Rachel’s room. She sat on her hammock, legs dangling, rocking gently.

“Do you think our hostess left us with the only keys to our trunks?” Rachel asked.

Jason frowned. “Good point.”

“Let’s never leave our belongings unattended.”

“Really? I was thinking we might hit the local cineplex, see what’s playing.”

Rachel folded her arms. “I know it isn’t your fault, but I didn’t like how I was treated in the tavern. People acted like I didn’t exist.”

“You did a good job rolling with it,” Jason said. “We have to blend in.”

“I know,” Rachel said. “But it makes it hard for me to help. I knew Kerny wanted to overcharge us. Didn’t you notice how the waitress went straight to him after you tipped her, and how extra friendly he became?”

“Sort of,” Jason said vaguely, embarrassed at having missed the signals. “I just thought it might be nice to have a roof over our heads. Who knows when we’ll get another chance to sleep indoors?”

Rachel scowled thoughtfully. “We were probably safer alone in the woods. Everyone seems too interested in us. Have you noticed the eyes on us since we walked into town?”

“Yes.”

“That weirdo Ned was the only person with the guts to say what everyone else was thinking. People don’t travel around here. We’ve drawn a lot of attention.”

Jason scratched his forehead. “Should we leave?”

"I don't think so," Rachel said. "If we take off before tomorrow, it will just make us look more suspicious. But we should be on guard."

"I hear you," Jason said. "We'll lay low, stay in our rooms. Do you think they have HBO?"

"Only in the fitness center," Rachel replied.

"I'm a little tired," Jason said. "Might be a decent time to sneak a nap."

"I think I have you figured out," Rachel said. "When in doubt, sleep."

"No fair," Jason complained. "Aren't you tired too? We've been hiking for days and staying up half the night on watch."

"I've been too keyed up to sleep well since I got here," Rachel said. "It might feel good to rest behind locked doors."

"Okay, I'll be in my room."

"Just a second. Quick question. Do you think you're the hero the Giddy Nine were trying to summon?"

Jason paused, pondering the story Tark had shared. It had been the music of the Giddy Nine that had caused him to topple into the hippo tank. Could he possibly be the hero they were hoping to call? After all, he had already begun a quest to destroy Maldor.

"If I was the hero they were looking for, those musicians were crazier than anyone ever realized."

"It is quite a coincidence," Rachel said softly. "Galloran seemed to think we were the people the oracle wanted."

Jason shrugged. "Just in case, I'll try not to die."

"Probably smart."

On returning to his room, Jason locked the flimsy door and tried out the hammock. Lying back comfortably, swaying gently, he closed his eyes. How could he be the hero they wanted? What had he ever done? Pitch a few shutouts? Get good grades? What about Rachel? The lady working with the Giddy Nine had apparently called her to Lyrian as well.

Could the fate of an entire world really depend on them? Did either of them stand a chance of succeeding? Galloran seemed to have faith in them. Could they possibly live up to his expectations?

The hammock was seductively comfortable. Content to rest for the moment, Jason let his worries melt away.

Somebody was knocking on the door. Jason realized he had dozed. He hadn't slept long. It was still bright outside. Did Rachel need him? Or did his hostess

have a question? The soft knock was repeated. He tipped clumsily out of the hammock and opened the door.

It was Ned. “Hi, blue eyes,” the tall man said, stepping into the cramped room.

Jason backed into his room as Ned pressed forward presumptuously, eyes roving, one of them twitching a bit. “What do you want?” Jason asked.

“You’re a man on the move. Or maybe on the run?” Ned smiled. His gums looked pulled back too high. A few teeth were missing. “You ever swallowed a swallow? Ever badgered a badger? Ever outfoxed a fox?”

Jason found he had backed into his hammock. “What are you talking about? This is my room. I’m a friend, Ned.”

Ned eyed him knowingly. “They are all looking for you. I found you, though. Tell me true—you seen the book?”

“What book?”

“The one that saw you.”

Jason swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“Keep playing the fool, and I lose the glove.” Ned held up a gloved hand, and put his other hand in position to remove it. “Last chance: Tell me true.”

This was insane. “Yes, I have seen the book.” Jason had no idea what danger there was in Ned removing his glove, but he did not wish to find out.

Ned showed his smile. It reminded Jason of a picture his dad had shown him to scare him into brushing his teeth. “I once defied Maldor. Bad choice. Worst choice. The more you defy him, the more you deify him. He is the puppet master. He holds all the strings.”

Jason was speechless. His hand strayed beneath his cloak.

“Want to see my string?” Ned asked, tugging at his glove.

Jason pulled out his knife. The sheath was still on it. Quick as a mousetrap Ned chopped Jason’s wrist with one hand and stole the knife with the other. Jason pressed back against the hammock, rubbing his wrist. Ned calmly inspected the sheath. “Where’d you get this?”

“None of your business.” Jason prepared himself, muscles tense, ready to spring. The guy was tall and quick, but skinny. If he could just get a hold of him, he would slam him around the room a bit.

“Violence will not serve you. Answer me. Answer right, and the glove stays on.”

“Forget it.”

“You stole it.”

“No.”

Ned yanked the sheath off.

“Found it.”

“No.”

“Your silence is not loyalty. Don’t protect information I already know. Tell me who gave it to you.” Ned pointed the dagger at Jason, thumb covering the trigger that could eject the blade.

Jason did not want to get Galloran in trouble. “I won’t tell you.”

Ned licked his lips. One eyelid fluttered. “As a lad I served one man I would never betray. His mark lies upon the sheath.”

This surprised Jason. He wavered. “Galloran gave me the knife.”

The dagger dropped to the plank floor. Ned’s lips trembled. “He lives?”

Jason nodded.

Ned plunged his fingers into his orange curls. Emotions warred on his freckled face. “I pity you. Poor dupe. Poor gull. Listen. Ned never saw you. Leave in the night. A road departs town to the northeast. The Overland Loop. Or a trail leads southeast.”

“What’s under your glove?”

Ned grimaced. “My string. I will come in the night.” He cackled. “I’ll scout for you.” He rushed out of the room.

Jason collected his knife and sheathed it, returning the weapon to his pocket. As he locked his door, he heard a soft knock.

“Jason?” Rachel asked from the far side.

Jason opened the door. “Did you hear my visitor?”

“Thin walls,” she said, entering. “I missed a few words, but I got the gist.”

“He knows who I am,” Jason said. “He knows about our quest.”

“Should we leave?” she asked.

Jason thought for a moment. “We should stay. If Ned knows who we are, others will figure it out too. We may need somebody who knows the area. He said he would scout around and come for us after dark.”

“He seems nuts. I’m not sure we can trust him.”

“I’m not sure about anything,” Jason admitted. “But I think he’s sincere. If we’ve drawn unwanted attention, slipping out of town after dark probably makes the most sense.”

“Unless people come for us before then,” Rachel pointed out.

“You have your explosive crystal ball?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“Keep it handy.”

She nodded. “I’m going to find Kerny’s mother. Maybe she can go buy us some provisions.”

“Not a bad idea,” Jason said. “We’re running low. And we might want to think twice before hanging around another town.”

“I’ll need to give her money,” Rachel prompted.

Jason got out the little bag with the pellets. “How much?”

“Fifteen should buy a lot. I got the feeling those puckerlies were pricey.”

Jason handed over three bronze pellets. “She may keep the money and betray us.”

“It beats openly roaming the town, trying to buy provisions ourselves,” Rachel said. “I’ll pay attention. If she stays away too long, we can make a run for it.”

“Tell her to keep a drooma for her trouble,” Jason said.

“I was thinking two.”

“Whatever.”

“Can I borrow the satchel?”

“Sure.”

“You should probably keep the door locked.”

“I will.”

After Rachel left, Jason practiced drawing his knife. Pulling it out still in the sheath had failed to intimidate Ned. He rehearsed until he could slip a hand into his cloak and swiftly produce a naked blade.

It was well into the afternoon. If they were going to sneak away in the night, Jason realized he should probably sleep. It took some time to calm his mind, but eventually he dozed.

\* \* \*

All was dark when Jason woke. He could barely make out the shape of the trunk on the floor. He had no idea how late it was, but the night was quiet. He wondered if Rachel was all right. If there had been commotion, he supposed he would have awakened.

Jason got out of his hammock and stood at the window. He saw no stars. Where was Ned? Should they wait for him? What if he failed to come?

After gathering his belongings from the trunk, Jason tiptoed to the door. A tap on the window startled him. Whirling, he saw Ned’s face beyond the warped

glass, upside down. Jason undid the latch, and Ned swung nimbly from the roof through the open window.

“Come with me,” Ned whispered.

“What?”

“Listen.”

Jason held still and focused on his hearing. After a tense moment a faint creak reached his ears. “That? What is it?”

Ned’s breath was in his ear. “Somebody failing to move silently.”

Panic jolted through Jason. “What about Rachel?”

“Already on the roof,” Ned whispered. “Follow quietly.”

Without awaiting a reply, Ned smoothly boosted himself onto the windowsill and disappeared onto the roof. Momentarily stunned, Jason again heard the creak of stealthy footsteps in the hall, this time just outside his door. The handle turned gently. It was locked.

Jason ducked under his hammock and climbed stealthily onto the windowsill, glancing at the fifteen-foot drop to the dim ground. Why did the little inn have to be on stilts? Standing awkwardly, Jason reached up for the eaves above his window. Ned caught hold of him and helped pull him onto the roof, where Rachel sat waiting, as promised.

Following Ned’s example, they lay flat, listening. A gentle scrape of metal against metal suggested someone picking a lock. Jason heard a door creak open, followed by hurried footsteps.

“He’s not here,” a man exclaimed in a loud whisper.

“Maybe he escaped this way,” a different voice said, right below Jason, at the open window.

“And flew out to sea,” the first man spat sarcastically. “Come along.”

They clomped out of the room, and Jason heard the door to Rachel’s room crash open. Footsteps shuffled noisily, all pretense at stealth gone.

“Nothing,” a voice said.

“What did you expect?” the other voice chided.

Heavy feet clomped hurriedly away.

Ned held a finger to his lips. The three of them waited in silence. Finally, Ned spoke. “You have a friend.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“A riderless horse wandered into town this evening. I went up the Overland Loop, found a conscriptor facedown on the roadside. Stab wounds in the back. Dead mangler not far off. Such a thing has not been seen in some time. I



dragged the corpses deep into the woods. You have a friend out there. Strange folk in town tonight. Leave by the main road. That way may be clear a while. You never knew me.”

Ned crept across the roof in a crouch. Nothing creaked. He dropped out of sight.

“How late is it?” Jason asked.

“Maybe an hour past nightfall,” Rachel answered. “When Ned showed up at my window, he almost gave me a heart attack.”

“We should take his advice and get out of town,” Jason whispered. “That was way too close. Do you have the new provisions?”

“In the satchel,” Rachel said. “I’m ready.”

“I think Ned dropped onto the porch. That’s probably the only decent way down.”

Jason and Rachel slunk along the roof to the front of the house, cringing as shingles creaked. By the time they got there, Ned was no longer in view—not on the porch, not down on the street. Jason saw no sign of anyone else, either.

“It looks clear,” Rachel whispered. “We should move.”

Jason slid into position to drop from the roof to the porch. Suddenly several of the wooden shingles overhanging the eaves of the house snapped, and he crashed to the porch on his back.

Lying stunned on the splintery planks, Jason tried to breathe. His lungs refused to function. All he could think was that his back was broken. He rolled onto his side. A feeble croak escaped his lips, then abruptly he was breathing again. Never had the wind been so brutally knocked out of him.

He sat up, holding still and listening to ascertain if his clumsiness had attracted attention. Both the house and street remained quiet.

Rachel dropped down lightly beside him. “Good thing I’m carrying the explosives,” she whispered.

Jason drew a shuddering breath. “No kidding. Let’s get off this porch before somebody comes.”

They hurried down the rope ladder. The night was overcast. They moved quickly along dark streets, light bleeding through a few shuttered windows. Jason stayed a step ahead of Rachel, one hand inside his cloak, fingering his knife. The moving windows of the Tavern-Go-Round flashed from the slope above the town.

Jason thought he knew the road Ned had meant. The road he and Rachel had followed into town left the village angling toward the northeast.

As he passed quiet houses, Jason heard the lapping of the water in the harbor and the distant crash of breakers. A goat bleated from a pen beside a shadowy house with a big anchor half-buried in the front yard. Jason jumped, drawing his knife.

When they reached the main road, Jason set a brisk pace, taking long, quick strides. Rachel stayed silently at his side. For a good while they mounted a steep incline. The night was so dark they proceeded by feel and by faith that there would be no obstacle in the road. Like a dead mangler. Or a live one.

When dawn began to turn the sky gray, they took a break, ravenously devouring some of their newly acquired bread, sausages, and cheese. Jason eyed the energy berries the loremaster had given him. They showed no sign of spoiling, so he decided to conserve them.

As daylight brightened the overcast sky, Jason and Rachel resolved to walk the day away before sleeping. Around noon they ate again. While they were eating, a wagon appeared up ahead on the road. Jason and Rachel rushed for cover, ducking out of sight in the trees, remaining hidden until well after the wagon had rattled past.

A couple of hours after lunch they walked through a small village of tall, steep-roofed buildings constructed of stone and mortar, all crowded close together. A few were shops; most were residences. All of the buildings looked old. People watched them as they passed, their suspicious glares burning into Jason.

He noticed a group of young kids laughing as they played a game that involved throwing rings around a pair of stakes in the ground. A few of the kids chased one another. One spun in place until she got dizzy and fell down.

Jason frowned. This world was no place for children. What sort of future would these little ones have?

“Maybe we should have gone around the town,” Rachel muttered, “made our way through the woods.”

“Too late now,” Jason answered.

By the time the sun was setting, both Jason and Rachel were trudging along wearily. They roamed a good distance off the road and swallowed a few bites of food. Jason threw himself down in his blanket between the sprawling roots of a thick tree with smooth brown bark and fuzzy green leaves shaped like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

“I’ll take first watch,” Rachel yawned.

“I can,” Jason offered, half asleep.

“I’ve got it. You rest. I’ll wake you soon.”

# FERRIN

The following morning Jason awoke to something tickling his face. He brushed his cheek and sat up quickly. A shiny red centipede longer than his middle finger lay upside down on the ground beside him. The creature wriggled over and disappeared under a root.

Jason shivered. How long had that thing been crawling on him? One of the little drawbacks to sleeping out in the open.

Sitting up, he looked over at Rachel, sound asleep, wrapped in her cloak and blanket. Had she ever awakened him for his watch? He didn't think so. Could she have fallen asleep on guard? She looked pretty and vulnerable, lying there serenely. He felt a sudden desire to protect her.

Famished, Jason started rummaging for food. Although he tried to be quiet, the noise disturbed Rachel, and she sat up, gasping and blinking. After looking around for a moment, she turned to Jason. "I'm so sorry! I don't remember falling asleep!"

"We survived," Jason replied.

Rachel squeezed fistfuls of her blanket, her jaw tight. "Take off your socks," she said bravely.

"It might be hard to get them off. They feel pretty stiff."

"Ha-ha."

"Seriously, I might need your help. Some of my blisters popped yesterday. The socks feel plastered to my soles."

"I feel bad enough. You don't need to rub it in."

Jason had to admit she looked miserable. "Tell you what. We were exhausted. And I got a warning the first time I fell asleep on watch. You deserve one also."

Rachel scowled. "I don't deserve a break. I could have gotten us killed."

"Next time you blow it, you will smell and taste my socks. Same goes for me. No mercy from now on. Have some breakfast. We should get back on the road."

As they proceeded, the forest dwindled to meadowland, still interspersed with groves of trees, but primarily featuring broad expanses of brush and wild grass. From the position of the climbing sun Jason could tell that the road was generally bending northward.

Around midmorning Jason and Rachel came to a crossroads. This was no footpath branching off the main thoroughfare—it was the junction of two major roadways. A tall post with a crossbeam lashed near the top marked the intersection. A bag hung from the crossbeam, well out of reach.

Jason paused, hands on his hips. The roads joined at right angles, and all looked to be in good repair. “Which way?”

“West would take us back toward the Blind King,” Rachel said. “And we came from the south. So north or east.”

“Ned called this road the Overland Loop. That might mean if we continue north, it will circle back to where we started following it.”

“Hello?” called a weak male voice, startling both of them.

Jason turned in a circle. Nobody was in sight, and there did not appear to be any cover for a good distance. “Who said that?” he asked sharply.

“Praise the fates,” the voice cried, gaining strength. “Help me. I’m up here.”

Rachel shared a befuddled glance with Jason. “Could that have come from the sack?” she asked.

“Sounded like it.” Jason stared up at the bag dangling from the crossbeam. The sack looked barely large enough to hold a bowling ball. Jason raised his voice. “Who are you?”

“I’m Ferrin,” the voice responded, muffled by the bag. “I’m a displacer. A gang of ruffians robbed me and left me here to die. Please get me down.”

“How do you fit in the bag?” Rachel asked, baffled.

“Like I said, I’m a displacer. I understand you may not be terribly fond of our kind, but please don’t leave me here to rot.”

“We come from far away,” Jason said. “We don’t know what displacers are.”

“It’s unkind to tease the helpless.”

“We’re serious,” Rachel assured him.

“They chopped off my head and buried my body. Things like that don’t kill displacers. Parts severed from my body remain linked by cross-dimensional connections.”

Jason gazed at the sack in disbelief. “So just your head is in there?”

“Yes, and I’ll be just fine once you reattach me to my body.”

“Where is your body?” Rachel asked.

“Hard to say. I can feel that I was buried. I could tell they didn’t take me far. Look around.”

Jason and Rachel searched the surrounding area. Off at a diagonal between the northbound and eastbound roads Rachel noticed a rectangular patch of churned-up earth. “I think I see where they buried you.”

“Good. Go exhume me, and I’ll help you get my head down.”

“You still have control over your body?” Rachel exclaimed.

“My body doesn’t feel disconnected,” Ferrin explained patiently. “Blood from the heart in my body under the ground is still flowing into my head up here. The air I breathe in this sack is still filling my lungs. All my nerves remain in contact with my brain. That is what makes me a displacer.”

“And you can reattach your head?” Jason asked.

“Nothing could be simpler. Coming apart doesn’t serve much purpose unless you can put yourself back together. But I need you to dig me up first.”

“Should we do this?” Jason whispered to Rachel.

“We can’t just let him die,” she replied softly.

“What if he’s lying? What if he’s a criminal?”

“Then he’s probably on our side.”

Jason and Rachel shed their cloaks. Crouching in the freshly turned soil, Jason began scooping away loose dirt with his hands, getting gritty bits of earth under his fingernails. Rachel set to work alongside him. The hole had been recently filled, so the dirt moved easily. Before long they reached the body, maybe three feet under, lying supine. They worked to clear the soil from atop the length of the body, mounding it off to either side. Soon the body sat up and started helping.

Jason and Rachel stepped away from the hole as the headless body clambered out like some monstrosity from a horror movie. Hearing about a headless body from a voice in a sack was one thing—watching a headless body rise from a shallow grave was another.

“I can’t see a thing through this sack,” Ferrin declared. “Could one of you lead my body over here?”

Rachel shook her head and gestured for Jason to do it. He approached the body, which stood motionless beside the hole, one hand outstretched. It wore a gray shirt, canvas pants, and rope-soled shoes, all caked with earth. As Jason drew near, he stared down at the headless neck, observing a perfect cross-section of muscle, skin, fat, blood vessels, bone, the spinal cord, the esophagus—

everything. Strangely, no soil clung to the exposed tissue. Measuring himself against the body, Jason found that the neck came up to the top of his chest.

Jason took the hand of the body and led it over to the gibbet below the bag. “Pleasure to meet you,” the muffled voice said, while the body shook his hand gratefully. “Can you see how they fastened me up here?”

Rachel approached cautiously, keeping her distance, an expression of morbid fascination on her face.

“A cord holding the bag shut is looped over a hook,” Jason said.

“Can you reach it?” Ferrin asked.

“Not even close.”

“Could you reach if I put you on my shoulders?”

“I think so, but I don’t want to scramble your insides. What if I hurt your spinal cord or something?”

“Don’t worry. The displacement field that keeps me connected protects the exposed portions of my anatomy.”

The body crouched down.

“I’m not sure I could balance on you without a head there. Plus I’m taller than you. Why don’t you climb on my shoulders? You should be able to unhook the bag by touch just fine.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason knelt down, and the body, feeling its way, sat on his shoulders. Rachel came forward and helped Jason stagger to his feet. He moved under the bag.

“I have it,” Ferrin announced.

Jason knelt again, and the body dismounted. The body opened the mouth of the bag, removed the head by the hair, and held it so that it could see Jason and Rachel.

“Many thanks,” the head said. “You saved my life.”

“Our pleasure,” Jason replied.

Rachel shook her head slowly. “Not to be rude, but this is the craziest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Jason couldn’t help agreeing—although, amazingly, crazy things were starting to feel almost expected now.

The body set the head on the stump of the neck. Head and body instantly fused together without any mark to suggest they had ever been separated. Ferrin had a black eye and scrapes on his forehead and left cheek.

“Better?” Ferrin asked.

“Less weird,” Rachel acknowledged gratefully.

Jason smiled. "I'm Jason. This is my sister, Rachel. Looks like you got beat up."

Ferrin flashed a lopsided smile. "The price I pay for being wizardborn."

"Was your father a wizard?" Rachel asked.

"Are you two as naive as you act?" Ferrin asked. "How can that be?"

"We're from far away," Jason reminded him.

"So far away that you haven't heard of displacers or the wizardborn races? Never mind, I don't mean to pry; you two just saved my skin. Rachel, when I say 'wizardborn,' I mean metaphorically. My race did not occur naturally. Displacers were created by wizards."

"I see," Rachel said.

"None of the wizardborn get much love from regular humans," Ferrin continued. "But displacers are especially despised—partly because we're hard to distinguish from regular humans, partly because our race is dying out, making us easy to pick on."

"Some bullies figured out you were a displacer?" Rachel asked.

"They were merciless. Once my head was in the sack, they kicked me up and down the road. A real group of princes, let me tell you. I suppose I should be grateful they wanted me to die a slow, torturous death, because now I may actually survive, thanks to your kindness."

"Did you know them?" Jason asked.

"Not personally. I saw them in an alehouse west of here. They must have followed me out of town."

"Where were you coming from?" Jason asked.

"Away farther to the west. I should have seen it coming. Too many of these small-town bumpkins prey on outsiders."

"We've noticed," Rachel said.

"Do you travel a lot?" Jason asked.

"It's all I do," Ferrin replied. "Displacers are wanderers. We're not like the drinlings or the Amar Kabal, with a homeland to call our own. We're unwanted, so we try to keep our identities secret and get by however we can."

"Do you know how we can get to Trensicourt?" Jason asked.

"You follow this road to the east, then take the northern fork when it splits. I happen to be going eastward myself. Unless you object to the company of a displacer, we could travel together. These are dangerous times."

"We'd enjoy some company," Jason said, looking at Rachel.

"We've run into some unpleasantness as well," she added.



“There can be safety in numbers,” Ferrin said. “Fair warning: Traveling with a displacer can occasionally be troublesome. If others recognize my true nature, you could share in my unpopularity.”

“To be honest,” Jason said, “traveling with us might be risky as well.” Rachel gave him a worried look, as if concerned he might say too much. “Servants of the emperor might be hunting us.”

Ferrin clapped Jason on the shoulder. “I’m not surprised. Youthful siblings would not roam so far afield without reason. Maldor harasses everyone. He is not fond of travelers or visitors from distant lands. I am certain he has no great love for me, either. I will gladly risk traveling with you, if you will brave my company.”

“It would be nice to have a guide,” Rachel said.

“I agree,” Jason said.

“Then it’s settled!” Ferrin brushed some of the dirt from his sleeves and torso. “If I can’t trust the pair who saved my life, who can I trust?”

They set off down the eastbound road.

“How do you make a living?” Jason asked.

“I do whatever I can find. Never one thing for too long. I’ve been a sailor, a horse trainer, a butler, a merchant, an actor, a farmhand, a hired sword—you name it.”

“Sounds like an interesting life,” Rachel said.

“Too interesting, sometimes,” Ferrin replied with a grimace. “How about the two of you? What do you do?”

“We’re students,” Rachel said.

“We interrupted our studies to travel,” Jason added.

“Ah,” Ferrin said, nodding in approval. “The education of the open road. Reading about Trensicourt is no substitute for walking its streets.”

“That’s the idea,” Jason said. “Do you know why traveling is so discouraged?”

“I can speculate,” Ferrin said. “Maldor occupies this land, governing largely through officials selected from among the local populace. To discourage unified rebellion, he stifles interaction between communities. He prefers those he governs to remain divided and ignorant, especially in outlying regions far from his centers of power.”

They proceeded in silence for a few minutes.

“You have provisions?” Ferrin asked.

“Enough for a few days,” Rachel said.

“The bandits who jumped me cleaned me out,” Ferrin said. “But I won’t be a burden. They missed some money hidden in my shoe. There is a town a day’s journey from here. We’ll be fine.”

“We had bad luck in the last town,” Jason said.

“So did I,” Ferrin chuckled. “We should be all right if we keep our heads down and stick together. As we draw nearer to Trensicourt, travelers become less conspicuous.”

Ferrin kept scanning the side of the road, occasionally wandering some distance into a meadow or stand of trees to retrieve a stick. He discarded several before finding one he liked. “This may do,” he said, examining it from different angles. “The item I most regret losing was my walking stick. It was perfect. I had it capped in silver. If not for the silver they probably would have left it.” He used the sturdy, straight stick he had recovered like a staff for several paces. “Yes, this will suffice.”

Before long Ferrin picked out a walking stick for Rachel. “Try it. It conserves energy. Let your arms do some of the work.”

“Thanks,” she said.

Soon thereafter he found one for Jason as well. As the day grew warm, Jason bundled up his cloak. Ferrin began whistling tunes Jason had never heard. The warbling whistle had a broad range, and Ferrin seemed to have good pitch. Rachel whistled “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Ferrin liked it, learned it quickly, and soon began embellishing the melody. Then he started working on a harmony to whistle along with Rachel. The first few attempts were only marginally successful, but eventually he found one that worked rather well.

Jason spotted a couple of lizards longer than his foot. They darted away when he got near them. Ferrin warned him to stay away from a metallic blue beetle trundling lazily across the road. “You would be shocked how foul they smell if you get them angry. If you tread on one, you have to burn the shoe. It’s that bad.”

They chose a spot in a little stand of trees not far from the road to spend the night, and slept under the stars.

\* \* \*

By noon the following day they were passing farms. For a drooma a man heading into town on a wagon gave them a ride. As they bumped along the road, Jason observed the countryside. Rippling oceans of wheat and barley turned farmhouses into islands. They passed a small, fragrant, fenced orchard, where

bees hummed among the ripening fruit. Then three large windmills came into view, great white sails turning slowly in the gentle breeze.

The farms got progressively smaller. Before long they could see the town. It was much bigger than the little seaside village. The buildings were sturdy wooden structures, mostly unpainted, a few of them three stories high. The main street in town was broad enough for several wagons to move side by side, and it was interrupted by several wide cross streets.

“We’ll climb down here,” Ferrin said. The farmer reined in his team.

“Thanks for the ride,” Jason said as he dropped to the road.

The silent farmer nodded, flicking his reins. The wagon lurched forward.

“I know a reliable place for food,” Ferrin said.

Jason and Rachel followed Ferrin through the door of one of the largest buildings along the main street. Inside there were half as many people as tables, and a long marble-topped bar stood empty against the far wall. “This place gets busy in the evening,” Ferrin said as they strolled up to the bar, taking seats on stools.

A heavy woman with frizzy brown hair came up, wiping the bar with a stained rag. “How can I help you?”

Ferrin leaned forward. “We want lunch, hearty portions with a bird involved.”

She nodded. “To drink?”

“Cider for me.”

She looked at Jason.

“Water.”

“Do you have milk?” Rachel asked.

The corners of the barmaid’s mouth twitched toward a smile. “Sure.”

The woman walked off, then returned with drinks. Ferrin, Rachel, and Jason sipped and talked softly while they waited. The woman eventually brought out plates of roast duck, heavily seasoned and marinated in oily gravy, with vegetables and hot bread on the side.

“Good bird,” Ferrin commented around a bite.

Jason nodded, blotting up some gravy with a piece of bread.

“Lots of bones,” Rachel said, picking at the meat tentatively.

“How’s the milk?” Jason asked.

“Good. Creamy. A little warm.”

Ferrin finished first. “Pardon me, but I need to find the outhouse.”

Jason stripped the last of the meat from the bones, then downed the last of his water. He sighed after emptying his glass.

"It's nice traveling with Ferrin," Jason said to Rachel.

"He's the most likeable person we've met since the Blind King."

Jason nodded. In spite of the detachable body parts, Ferrin seemed like the sort of person he might have become friends with under any circumstances.

A man came up beside Jason from behind. A sharp point pricked Jason's side. Another man walked up on the opposite side. "Don't move or make a sound," said the man with the knife.

Jason gave a start. It was the short, one-armed rescuer from the river. Except he now had both arms. Was that possible? Could this be his twin? Jason noticed that one of his eyes was brown and the other was blue, a detail he had missed when they first met.

The man on the other side was the lean man who had wielded the bow. He held a new bow, very fine-looking.

"He remembers us," said the lean man, as if the fact were endearing.

"Is there a problem?" Rachel asked the lean man. She had not yet noticed the knife.

"Clear out of here," the lean man threatened her.

"You might want to listen to them," Jason suggested.

Rachel backed away a couple of steps, one hand disappearing under her cloak. Jason hoped she wouldn't pull out the orantium. Hand grenades were not intended for close quarters.

"You played nasty with the wrong men," the shorter guy told Jason, relishing the moment. "We don't want a scene. Take a walk with us." He kept his cloak draped over the knife.

"Why should I?" Jason asked, not wanting to end up alone with these two.

"If you don't, I'll stick you right here and now. Then we'll stick your friend. You don't have to die today. Choice is yours."

Jason was pretty sure he recognized the voice. "Was it you two who broke into my room near the Tavern-Go-Round?"

The shorter man grinned. "You knew about that, did you? Don't know how you slipped by us. Good job there. Why don't you come along?"

"Are these friends of yours?" Ferrin asked politely from behind the trio.

The knifepoint poked persuasively into Jason's side. "Sure," he said without turning around. "What were your names again?"

"Tad," said the shorter one.

“Kale,” said the lean one.

“Do you mind if I maim your friends?” Ferrin asked calmly.

Jason felt the point in his side waver.

“Why not?” Jason said.

Jason had his back to Ferrin, so from the corner of his eye he barely saw the walking stick swinging before it thumped Tad on the head, sending him sprawling. Kale dropped his bow and pushed back his robe to grab the hilt of a short sword. From his seat on the stool Jason kicked Kale in the hip as the man drew his weapon, knocking him sideways and inadvertently causing a stroke from Ferrin’s walking stick to glance off Kale’s shoulder rather than land on his skull.

The overzealous swing left Ferrin momentarily unprotected. Kale slashed fiercely, severing Ferrin’s arm just above the elbow. Wielding the stick with his remaining arm, Ferrin deflected a thrust aimed at his chest. Rachel shoved Kale from behind, and as he stumbled forward, Ferrin clubbed him in the throat.

Kale crumpled to the floor, clutching his crushed larynx, legs jerking.

“What’s going on here?” boomed a deep voice.

An overweight man wearing an embroidered bandoleer entered the room, flanked by a pair of men with less fancy bandoleers, each holding a crossbow. Ferrin picked up his dismembered arm and reattached it.

Tad got up, eyes wide, hand over a bleeding gash near the crown of his head. “This *displacer* attacked me and my friend! We were just trying to enjoy a drink.”

Kale continued to thrash on the ground, one hand on his throat, the other grasping helplessly, eyes rolling back.

“Not true,” Jason blurted. “These men were trying to abduct me at knifepoint. My friend stepped in to help me.”

“Lies!” shrieked Tad with surprising sincerity.

“The limb dropper struck first,” said a bald man across the room. “I saw it plain enough, constable. He hit the little one over the head, then smashed his friend in the throat when he came to help.”

“And the girl?” the constable asked.

“She entered the brawl,” the bald man reported. “She helped the limb dropper take down the fellow on the floor.”

The constable shook his head. “Sure as storm clouds bring rain, drifters bring trouble. You four will have to spend some time in the lockup, until we get this sorted out.”

“Four!” Tad yelled. “I’m the victim! My best friend is dying!”

Kale's struggles were subsiding into random flinches and spasms.

"Then why aren't you trying to help him?" the constable asked. "You're protesting too loudly, friend. Harlin, did the little guy pull a knife on the young man?"

"He may have had a knife out when the limb dropper struck," the bald man said without much conviction. "Same knife you can see on the floor near his feet."

"Burn the limb dropper and call it even," a harsh female voice cried.

A few others muttered agreement.

The constable held up a hand. "I administer the emperor's justice. Under our laws even limb droppers get a trial. Patience. We'll make examples of these troublemakers, all in due time. Silas, how fares the man on the floor?"

A gray-haired man had crouched over Kale. "Not conscious. Still alive, for the moment."

Tad, Jason, Rachel, and Ferrin were led away.

The constable and his men took them to a low stone building, one of the only structures in town not made of wood. Three cells, with stone partitions between them, occupied the rear wall of a spacious room. The heavy bars of the cells were set close together. A bearded man sat in one cell, staring into a corner with his arms folded.

Jason's cloak was taken, and after a quick search his poniard was removed from a pocket. Ferrin, Tad, and Rachel were searched as well. Jason held his breath as a man checked Rachel's cloak, but he did not seem to notice the crystal sphere. Tad had left his knife behind in the tavern.

One of the men in bandoleers retrieved a key ring from a peg on the wall. Ferrin and Jason entered the center cell. Tad was placed in the cell to their right, with the bearded man. Rachel went to the cell on their left.

Once the prisoners were in their cells, the constable departed with three men. The remaining guard relaxed in a chair, leaning back, filing a piece of cream-colored wood.

Ferrin sat beside Jason in a rear corner of their cell. "I know the reputation of this constable," Ferrin said quietly. "He's a stern one. When Kale dies, and unfortunately he will die, the three of us will be sentenced to death."

"He mentioned a trial," Jason said.

"In this town Constable Wornser has final say in matters of sentencing. He'll be judge and jury. To acknowledge the law we'll receive a cursory hearing, and then we will be executed."

“Is there anything we can do?”

Ferrin smiled. “They evidently do not appreciate the abilities of a displacer. If they did, I would not be in a cell such as this.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Can you split apart and slip through the bars?”

“Perhaps, though I would not risk it. Separating myself longitudinally is highly dangerous. If I place too much strain on my displacement field, I come apart permanently. Once the cross-dimensional connection is lost, my body would function just like yours. Namely, my innards would slop out all over the floor.”

“Sounds appetizing. If you can’t get through the bars, what can you do?”

“Wait until tonight when things quiet down. You’ll see.”

# JAILBREAK

When Jason awoke, a single oil lamp lit the room, casting parallel shadows of prison bars into the cell. Ferrin knelt beside him, shaking his shoulder.

“You have an astonishing capacity to sleep through commotion,” Ferrin whispered.

Jason felt disoriented. Sleeping slouched in the corner had left his neck sore. He squinted at the displacer. “What’s going on?”

“Not long after you went to sleep, the constable returned to report that Kale had died. People have been in and out all evening. Our hearing will be tomorrow. Fortunately, we won’t be here.”

“How?”

“You’ll see. You knew those men who attacked you. Tell me about them.”

Jason sighed. “I tried to save a bunch of musicians from intentionally going over a waterfall. I meant to help, but it turned into a mess. I knocked the shorter guy, Tad, into the water. He only had one arm back then. Kale fished him out. I knew they were angry, but I’m surprised they cared enough to track me down all this way.”

“You say Tad had only one arm?”

“Yes. Unless this is his brother. Wait, maybe he’s a displacer too!”

Ferrin furrowed his brow. “Probably not. More likely they were conscripted. Maldor has the power to restore limbs. A conscriptor must have used the replacement of his arm as leverage to gain his service.”

Jason recalled how the Blind King had explained that Maldor had offered to restore his sight. “A conscriptor sent a boarhound after me as well.”

Ferrin nodded. “They are masters of coercion. If conscriptors are sending assassins after you, the emperor must be more interested in you than I appreciated. On to more immediate concerns. Only one guard remains in the building.”

Jason started to sit up, but Ferrin pushed him down. “No need to look. He has fallen asleep in a chair with his back to our cell. I suspect a second guard



awaits outside the front door.”

“How do we get out of the cell in the first place?”

“I do not wish to permanently harm the guards if possible. They acted against us with no malice. But we cannot allow ourselves to be unjustly executed. My first plan involves the two of us feigning sleep. You begin groaning louder and louder, as if in the grip of a relentless nightmare. I’ll lie near the bars. When you hear me make my move, come lend a hand.”

Taking off his shirt, revealing a sparsely hairy chest and moderately developed musculature, Ferrin plucked off his left arm at the shoulder and set it on the floor. He replaced his shirt, and then sprawled on the floor with his back to the bars, concealing the fact that he held his left arm in his right hand. He winked at Jason, who lay gawking at the disconnected appendage.

Jason closed his eyes. Rolling over, he uttered a mounting series of moans culminating in a shout. Through the slits of his eyes Jason saw the guard stir in his chair. Closing his eyes, Jason let out a long, painful groan, tossing his head from side to side.

“That’s enough,” the guard growled.

Jason began panting, then commenced a fresh series of grunts and groans. He heard footsteps, and risked slitting his eyes fractionally. The guard stopped well out of reach of the bars.

“Hey, you, wake up and shut up!”

Jason turned his head away from the bars, then back. He groaned louder, growling at the end.

“Pipe down,” called a voice from a neighboring cell.

The guard took a step closer. “Wake up!” he demanded.

Through his cracked eyelids Jason saw Ferrin leap to his feet and lean against the bars in a quick motion, holding out his severed arm to extend the length of his grasp. The hand of his detached arm caught the guard by the throat, and Ferrin hauled him brusquely against the bars.

Jason dove over to the bars, staying low and seizing the guard’s ankles. Ferrin released his hold on the severed arm, which continued to squeeze the guard’s throat. With his free arm Ferrin seized the man by the back of his head and pounded his forehead against the bars. Jason clung tightly to the struggling feet until the guard sagged.

After yanking the guard’s legs and arms through the bars of the cell, Ferrin told Jason to keep hold of the guard’s feet and to watch him closely. Welts began to discolor the guard’s face. Ferrin took off his shirt again and seamlessly

reattached his arm. Then he reached through the bars and made an underhand motion as if he were pitching a horseshoe.

As his arm swung forward, the hand detached from the wrist and sailed through the air, bumping against the wall near the peg where the keys hung. "Prongs!" Ferrin spat, using the word as profanity. The hand scuttled back to the cell on nimble fingers. Ferrin reattached it and tried again. This time the hand hit the keys but failed to catch hold of them. They jingled tauntingly as the hand slapped to the floor.

On the fifth try two fingers curled around the key ring, supporting the swinging hand precariously. The guard remained slumped, motionless, against the bars.

Moving dexterously, three fingers gripped the key ring while the thumb and index finger inched the ring off the peg. The keys jangled against the floor. Jason watched in fascination as the hand dragged the keys across the floor like a crippled spider. Ferrin's eyes were intent with concentration.

Ferrin reconnected the hand, picked up the keys, and pulled his shirt on over his head. Hastily reaching through the bars, he began trying keys. The gated section of the bars swung open. Ferrin scooped up the guard and hauled him into the cell. The man suddenly thrashed out of his grasp and twisted to lunge at Ferrin, who kned the guard in the gut and shoved him to the floor. Ferrin pounced onto the man, hooking one arm around his neck in a choke hold while the other covered his mouth, muffling his protests. The man squirmed and lurched, desperate to break the hold, but Ferrin held firm as the guard's face reddened.

After the man lay limp, Ferrin maintained the stranglehold for a moment. "This one likes to play possum," he said. "Even when he's locked in the cell his shouts could bring trouble."

Ferrin rolled the guard onto his back and squatted beside him, staring. After a few seconds he swatted the man between his legs. The guard did not flinch. "He's out for now," Ferrin said, exiting the cell with Jason and shutting the door. He tossed the keys to Jason, who began stabbing keys into the lock of Rachel's cell.

"I wondered what all the groaning meant," Rachel said.

"Ferrin is a genius," Jason replied, inserting the correct key and opening her cell.

"Should I finish off your friend?" Ferrin asked, jerking his head at Tad, who stood glaring at them, hands fisted around the bars of his cell.

Jason frowned. "I can't see killing him while he's at such a disadvantage, all penned up."

Ferrin raised his eyebrows. "Chivalrous. You realize he will continue to hunt you once he gets free. His presence means he has taken a vow to see you dead. Were your situations reversed, he would end your life without a twinge of remorse."

Tad spat through the bars.

"No," Rachel said. "Don't kill him. Not like this."

Tad smirked.

"She's right," Jason said. "It's one thing to act in self-defense. This would be something else."

"It's your neck," Ferrin said. "You want out?" he asked the bearded man in the cell with Tad.

"No. I'm only in for another day. I caused a public disturbance. Matter of fact, would you mind giving me a knock on the head so the constable don't blame me for not raising an alarm?"

"Come to the bars," Ferrin said. He trotted over and punched between the bars, striking the man square in the eye. The man stumbled back and sat down hard, cupping a hand over the injury.

"Why doesn't Tad raise an alarm?" Jason asked.

"He can probably guess what I would do in self-defense," Ferrin said. "Give me the keys back." After unsuccessfully trying a couple keys, Ferrin unlocked a closet and retrieved their belongings. Jason wrapped his cloak around his shoulders. The closet contained no additional weapons. Ferrin crossed to a desk, reached underneath, and pulled out a loaded crossbow that had been cunningly suspended on hidden hooks. "I like to keep my eyes open when people don't think I'm watching," he said. "They might have other arms stashed someplace, but we have no time to search. The guard we subdued was unarmed. Let's see if we can get out the front door. Keep your knife handy."

Jason gently placed his thumb over the flower-shaped trigger, ready to eject the blade. Moving cautiously, Ferrin guessed the door key on the first try. He turned it and thrust the door open. A startled guard turned around. Ferrin leveled his crossbow at the man. "Make no sound. Come inside."

The guard, holding a crossbow at his side, hesitated. "Move now or die," Ferrin stated coolly.

The guard came inside. "Lay down your weapons. Knife, too." The guard put his crossbow on the table, along with a leather belt connected to a sheathed

long knife.

Ferrin escorted him over to the cell where the other guard lay unconscious. Ferrin tossed the keys, and Jason unlocked the cell. Ferrin shoved the guard inside. "Kneel and hold still," Ferrin insisted.

The guard complied. Ferrin struck a measured blow to the back of his head with the heel of his hand. The man slumped to the floor.

"Is he out?" Rachel asked.

Ferrin nodded without checking him. Jason had a suspicion Ferrin had done this before.

Ferrin crossed to the table and buckled the belt with the long knife about his waist. He handed Rachel the other crossbow.

"Does it have a safety?" Rachel asked.

Ferrin glanced at the weapon. "To fire, slide this lever back, then use the trigger. Come."

The trio slipped out the front door into the night. "Walk carelessly," Ferrin advised. "No reason for us to look suspicious. We are merely escaped fugitives about to steal some horses to avoid a death sentence."

They strolled down a side street. Ferrin held his crossbow casually at his side. Jason clung to his poniard, keeping it under his cloak. Rachel hid her crossbow likewise.

At a signal from Ferrin, Jason and Rachel ducked into a small livery stable. A horse snorted and stamped. Ferrin put a finger to his lips. "You ride horses?"

"Only twice," Jason whispered, not mentioning that once was a pony ride at a circus as a child and the other walking single file along some trail in Arizona for a couple of hours on a guided excursion.

"I've ridden quite a bit," Rachel said.

Jason rolled his eyes. Of course she had!

Ferrin forced open a rickety closet door. Two of the horses started whinnying. Jason held his poniard ready as Ferrin saddled and bridled a big gray mount. Next Ferrin prepped a smaller white horse. He then bridled a roan with a long, thick mane, slightly shorter and broader than the first horse.

Ferrin led the gray horse out of its stall. He handed Jason the reins, nodded for Rachel to retrieve the white horse, and went to retrieve the roan. Jason patted the sleek neck, smoothing the fur.

"What do you think you're doing?" exclaimed a gruff voice. Jason turned to see a man entering the stable clutching a hoe like a weapon. He had messy hair and an open shirt that revealed a hairy chest.

Jason realized the man could not see Rachel and Ferrin, since they were currently in stalls. "I just love to pet horses," Jason said, his voice pathetically dreamy. "They're my most favorite ever. I can read their minds."

The stableman looked baffled. "These are private horses, son." An edge of stern accusation remained in his voice. He took a step closer.

Jason saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Ferrin stepped out of a stall holding his head in his hands. "Beware the boy," the head said. "He took my head. Yours will be next."

The startled man backed away, hoe raised protectively.

Ferrin's body set down his head, then seized a pitchfork and charged. The man threw down his hoe and ran. Ferrin's headless body flung the pitchfork sidearm so it spun end over end horizontally. The pitchfork tangled in the stableman's legs, and he fell heavily against the plank floor just shy of the door.

The body tackled the stableman as he began to rise. The gray horse tried to rear, nearly jerking Jason off his feet. He barely maintained his hold of the bridle.

"Toss me to my body," Ferrin's head demanded. "Make it a good throw."

Keeping one hand on the bridle, Jason crouched and scooped up the head. An underhand toss sent Ferrin's head spinning through the air to the outstretched hands of his body, which straddled the terrified stableman.

"That is much harder than it looks," Ferrin said while reattaching his head to his neck. "Catching your own head, I mean."

"I bet," Jason said.

The stableman lay motionless, breathing loudly through his nostrils, glazed eyes staring. "Leave me be," he pled.

Ferrin hauled him to his feet. "We mean you no harm, except to borrow a few horses. They will be returned. Just keep quiet and don't make trouble for yourself. Why don't you kneel right here?"

A practiced blow left the stableman unconscious on the floor.

"You need to teach me that one," Jason said.

"You all right, Rachel?" Ferrin called.

She led the white horse out of the stall. Pausing, she stared at the stableman on the floor. "Now we're real criminals."

"They made us criminals," Ferrin corrected, returning to the roan's stall. He led out the gelding, hoofs clomping on the planks. "Mount up," he said, bounding easily onto the roan's bare back.

Jason stuck his boot in a stirrup and hoisted himself up awkwardly. Rachel mounted the white mare smoothly.

Ferrin walked his horse over to Jason. "Don't stick your foot so far through the stirrup. If you fall you'll get dragged. And don't pull so tightly on the reins. They aren't there for your stability. Grip with your knees. Ready?"

"I guess."

Ferrin smiled. "You can read horses' minds. That was very nice. My kind of crazy."

"Thanks. The headlessness was a slick scare tactic."

"It kept our unfortunate friend off balance. Let's go."

Leaning down, Ferrin lifted a latch and shoved open the main stable doors. Rachel followed, and Jason trotted after them onto the street, bouncing up and down with the jerky gait. Then Ferrin touched his heels to the roan's sides, and the steed sped up to a canter. Rachel's mare started loping as well.

Without any urging, Jason's mount matched the pace of the other horses. For a horrible moment Jason thought he was going to get jounced out of the saddle to one side or the other. Each loping stride provided a fresh opportunity to lose his balance.

The town blurred by, dark buildings interrupted by an occasional lit window. Holding his reins loosely in one hand and clutching the pommel with the other, Jason tried to grip with his knees as Ferrin had instructed. Soon he discovered that if he let his body rock in synchronization with the horse's strides, the ride became less jarring.

They rode out of the town, Jason a few lengths behind Rachel and Ferrin. The town receded behind them, and Jason gradually grew more comfortable astride the running horse. He began to notice the cool night air washing over him, the bright stars glittering above through gaps in unseen clouds, the occasional twinkle of fireflies off to either side of the road. Somewhere in the night a pack of coyotes or wolves started howling. The howls rose in a cackling chant, intensifying until a heart-freezing shriek pierced the night. Jason's horse began to gallop, racing past Ferrin and Rachel, Jason tugging ineffectually at the reins. The howls ended abruptly. As he bounced along the dark road, Jason envisioned animals feeding on a kill.

He finally managed to yank his horse to a stop. Ferrin pulled up alongside him and dismounted. "We should walk for a while. These are hearty steeds, but we must conserve their strength." Rachel drew up and dismounted gracefully.

Jason clambered down. He rubbed his thighs. "Much more of this and I'll be bowlegged."

"You did fine," Ferrin laughed.

They led their horses along the lane.

"Will they chase us?" Rachel asked.

"Very likely. But not far beyond the outskirts of town. Now, your friend with the new arm, he is another story. I expect he will get released, so sleep with one eye open."

"Are we outlaws now?" Jason asked.

"Perhaps in that town. Not all towns have constables. And there is little communication between them. The only centralized power in the land belongs to Maldor."

"I'll wear a fake mustache and glasses if I ever go back through there," Jason said.

"Our manner of escape should help clear our names," Ferrin said. "Constable Wornser is no fool. We had plenty of opportunities to kill, if murder were our game. Still, if either of you ever comes back this way, go around the town."

They walked on in silence.

After a time they remounted the horses and trotted them. Jason marveled at how tireless the horses seemed.

As dawn began to color the sky, Ferrin led them off the road. They went over the shoulder of a hill and made camp in a hollow on the far side. Ferrin tethered the horses while Jason and Rachel laid out their blankets.

"I'll keep watch," Ferrin volunteered.

Jason fell asleep quickly but did not slumber long. He awoke with the sun barely above the horizon. He walked out of the shade of their hollow into the morning light, stretching the sore muscles in his legs.

"If you're up, I may catch a nap," Ferrin whispered.

Jason gave a nod. About fifty feet away stood a limbless stump of a tree, with a hole in its side the size of a dinner plate. Jason selected five rocks of similar size. He stood as if he were on a pitcher's mound, the first rock in his hand. He checked first base, went into a windup, and hurled the stone at the hole. Two of the five rocks went inside. Only one missed the tree entirely.

He wandered back over to the shade of the hollow. The horses nibbled at grass near where they were tethered. Rachel rested her head on her arms, her breathing slow and even. Ferrin lay on a patch of dirt, hands folded on his breast.

What a peculiar guy. He certainly knew how to handle himself in a fight. Whoever had jumped him and left him to die with his head in a sack must have really known what they were doing.

As Jason stood watching, the fingers and thumbs began dropping off Ferrin's hands. They wormed off his body and squirmed toward Jason across the ground. Jason jumped back, his voice cracking. "Uh, Ferrin, you're coming apart."

Ferrin's mouth bent into a small grin, and he opened one eye. "Did I startle you?"

"You are weird."

Ferrin collected his fingers. "You have good aim with rocks."

"Do you know what baseball is?"

Ferrin shook his head.

"It's a game we have where I come from. One of the people in the game has to throw balls with a lot of accuracy. I used to do that."

"I enjoy sports. Tell me the rules of baseball."

Jason stared at the ground, wondering how to begin. He had never explained baseball to somebody with no knowledge of the game. "Well, there are two teams. While one takes their turn batting, the other team is on the field to defend against hits."

"What is batting?"

"I'm getting there. A pitcher throws a ball, and the batter tries to hit it into play, or over the rear wall, which is a home run, unless it goes foul."

Ferrin looked perplexed.

Jason rubbed his chin. "There are four bases arranged in a diamond shape, and the hitter is trying to advance around all the bases. When he gets to the fourth base, which is where he started, he's home and scores a run."

Ferrin began reattaching his fingers one at a time. "This is the most complicated game in all of history. I have no idea what you mean."

"Wait. I'm just laying groundwork. I have to define a lot of stuff before you'll be able to understand. I wish we could play a few innings. It's much easier to pick up when you can see the game being played."

"I don't care about baseball," Rachel moaned, her face buried in her arms. "I'm trying to sleep."

"You can tell me more once we get on the road," Ferrin told Jason. "Despite the long night, we should set off early today, just in case."

The horses acted restive returning to the road, so Ferrin let them canter along the lane for a good distance before slowing to a walk. This time, under the



light of day, Jason enjoyed the ride. Despite feeling a little sore, he could see how people could develop a passion for horseback riding.

When the horses walked, Jason continued explaining baseball. Rachel added occasional clarifications. Ferrin began to grasp the concepts, and eventually the displacer could explain the difference between a ground-rule double and a double play. He even came to appreciate the necessity of the infield-fly rule.

Not long past noon they came to a small hamlet of low earthen buildings with thatched roofs. One of the houses had a corral fencing in a pair of horses. Ferrin dismounted in front of the door, handing his reins to Rachel.

A bald man with a hook nose answered the knock.

“Hello, friend,” Ferrin said. “We borrowed these horses from a man in the town down the road. For a fee would you see that he gets them back?”

“The one without the saddle is Herrick’s horse,” said the man.

“The others were taken from the same stable. By necessity we borrowed them without permission. No doubt he will be most anxious to see them returned.”

The bald man eyed Ferrin warily. “No doubt.”

“Jason, pay the man eight drooma—three ones and a five.” Jason began fishing out his money bag. “Three for your trouble, sir, and five for Herrick. Please convey our apologies.”

Jason climbed down from his horse and handed the bald man the money.

“Can I have your word the horses will be delivered as described?” Ferrin asked.

“I don’t give my word to thieves,” the man replied.

All friendliness vanished from Ferrin’s countenance and expression. “And I don’t deliver valuables via unsworn men. Swear or return the money.”

The man looked uncomfortable. “I swear all will be as you say.”

“Show no disrespect to thieves,” Ferrin pressed, in an icy tone. “You know who claims to rule this land. Many of the best men living work outside the law. Along with the most dangerous.”

The bald man looked thoroughly cowed. “I take your meaning. Forgive my words.”

“I will forgive when you deliver on your pledge,” Ferrin said, finally turning his back on the man.

The bald man accepted the reins from Rachel and Jason and began walking the horses toward the corral. Ferrin started down the road.

“You can be harsh,” Jason said.

Ferrin smirked. "Among my many professions my favorite was acting." He slapped Jason on the back. "We are honest men again."

"And women," Rachel added.

"Precisely," Ferrin agreed.

Ferrin stopped at a seemingly random house, larger than most along the road. He knocked.

A disheveled woman answered. "We are weary travelers," Ferrin said. "Do you know where we might purchase some food here in town?"

"There is no inn. All I can offer is rabbit stew."

"Three bowls for two drooma?"

Her eyes widened. "Come in," she said, smiling hospitably.

Ferrin winked at Rachel and Jason. Leaning toward them, he spoke for their ears only. "With a few drooma in your pocket everyone is your friend."

# NICHOLAS

The key to traveling without provisions,” Ferrin explained on their third evening after leaving the road, “is learning to recognize a bubblefruit tree.”

They stood in a dense grove surrounded by a sea of heather. “What do they look like?” Jason asked.

“Gray, mottled bark. Slender trunk. Rarely more than three or four times the height of a man. And broad, ferny foliage. Look for linear groupings of tiny leaflets.”

“Right here,” Rachel said, pointing to a nearby tree that fit the description.

“Do you see the bubblefruit?” Ferrin asked.

Jason walked over to the tree, squinting intently in the fading light. “No.”

“That is why you must learn to recognize the tree. The fruit grows only on the highest limbs.”

After Jason climbed the tree to procure a bunch, Jason and Rachel each ate a fruit, chasing them down with long sips of water. Jason recalled eating a bubblefruit hybrid at the Repository of Learning. The hybrid had tasted superior to the natural fruit. It seemed so long ago.

After abandoning the horses, Ferrin had suggested they forsake the main road to confuse any unfriendly pursuers. The diverging path wound through hilly country of heather and flowering weeds interspersed with mountainous bushes Ferrin called oklinders. The biggest oklinders rose over a hundred feet high and spread nearly twice as wide, the dense, spindly limbs abounding with dark, glossy leaves nearly all the way to the center.

Ferrin had explained that near the center of any oklinder hung moist white bulbs larger than watermelons, which were considered delicacies. Despite the delicious juice inside, few had the will to harvest them, because they were typically guarded by venomous thorns and colonies of aggressive wasps.

As they journeyed, Ferrin taught Jason and Rachel how to forage. They gathered nuts and berries, and used their crossbows to shoot bigger rabbits than

Jason had ever seen. Each shot was carefully chosen, as they only had a single quarrel for each crossbow and could not afford to split one against a stone.

“Tomorrow we should see Trensicourt,” Ferrin predicted, munching on a bubblefruit. “I will not be able to enter the city with you.”

“Why not?” Rachel asked.

“Too many men in that city would prefer me dead. Years ago I was beheaded within those walls, part of a group execution. They failed to recognize I was a displacer. I feigned death for most of a day, trusting the word of a friend. The friend lost her life restoring my head to my body, and I only barely escaped. Trensicourt can be a delightful city, with enough money and the proper connections.” He gave a wry smile. “But offend a nobleman over a woman, and the city turns on you.”

“Then we’ll part ways?” Jason asked.

“Nonsense. I’ll not lightly abandon fine traveling companions such as yourselves. Besides, I still owe you for saving my carcass. Unless you intend to remain in Trensicourt. I was under the impression this was a temporary visit.”

“It should be a short stay,” Rachel affirmed.

“Then I will await you in the first town north of Trensicourt, at an inn called the Stumbling Stag.”

“How long will you wait?” Jason asked.

“Until the sea dries into a desert,” Ferrin said.

“Be serious,” Rachel said.

“How about a fortnight?” Ferrin proposed.

“A what?” Jason asked.

“Two weeks,” Rachel supplied.

“Should be long enough,” Ferrin said. “If you do not join me, I will move on. Might I ask your business in Trensicourt? I am familiar with the city. Perhaps I could be of service.”

Jason glanced at Rachel. They had not yet disclosed their true mission to the displacer.

“We’re looking for a man named Nicholas,” Jason said. “He once worked closely with Galloran. We can’t share more particulars, because the information could endanger you.”

Ferrin grinned. “I love intrigue. But by all means, if you feel it is necessary, keep your secret; I’ll trust your judgment. Nicholas, you say. You can’t mean old Nicholas Dangler, the weapons master?”

“We might,” Rachel said. “Did he know Galloran?”

Ferrin frowned. "That is a name to mention with care, especially in Trensicourt. Yes, old Nicholas is a fallen nobleman. His family was heavily favored by Galloran. But once Galloran failed to return from his quests, the aristocracy turned on his favorite pets. If you want Nicholas Dangler, you'll need to inquire around the Fleabed, the poor district near Southgate."

"People in Trensicourt don't like Galloran?" Jason asked.

"The people?" Ferrin asked. "The people adore him. There was never a more popular prince, and his disappearance has lionized him, turned him into a myth. It's the current aristocracy who despises him. Never openly, mind you. They try to spread rumors to undermine his memory, and they have studiously ruined those who were once his staunchest supporters."

"Good to know," Rachel said.

"Take care in Trensicourt," Ferrin advised. "Its politics are cutthroat. With little warning the city can become most unpleasant."

\* \* \*

Early the next morning Trensicourt came into view as the threesome topped a ridge. From the elevated position they gazed out over a lush valley of cultivated farmland crisscrossed with watercourses, hedgerows, and low fences of piled stones. Across the valley loomed a long, sheer plateau, crowned by the walls and towers of Trensicourt.

"Amazing," Jason breathed.

"It's a real city!" Rachel exclaimed.

The imposing city wall ran along the brink of the plateau, with square guard towers spaced at increments along the mighty granite rampart. A buttressed road doubled back and forth from the valley floor up to a yawning gate. Behind the wall rose the tops of buildings, some flat, some domed, some gabled, and overshadowing the entire scene soared the lofty towers of a proud castle. The rising sun cast a rosy glow over the landscape, glinting warmly off glass and gilded spires.

"I will draw no closer to Trensicourt than this," Ferrin announced.

"Thank you for guiding us," Rachel said. "We'll meet at the Stumbling Stag."

"If we don't get decapitated," Jason added.

Ferrin peered back the way they had come. "I've had a persistent feeling that we're being followed. I generally trust my intuition in these instances, but I've encountered no direct proof. Either our tracker is supremely talented, or my

intuition has deserted me. In either case hurry to Trensicourt. The gates close at sundown. Don't dally, and watch your backs in the city."

"We'll be careful," Rachel promised.

Ferrin bent down and pulled off his shoe. From inside he removed two pellets, one gold, the other silver. "You've been paying my way and feeding me," Ferrin said. "I would have helped more, but the robbers took my copper and bronze. You may have need for gold and silver in Trensicourt. Either is worth enough to serve as a tempting bribe."

"We can't take this," Jason said.

"I insist," Ferrin said, waving a dismissive hand. "If you have no occasion to use it, bring it back to me. I'll feel better knowing you have it, and you will owe me nothing should you spend it."

"It's very kind of you," Rachel said.

"You can't imagine how seldom those who know I'm a displacer treat me like a person," Ferrin replied. "In case I wasn't clear, you may not want to mention our friendship inside the city. It could have negative consequences. I hope we meet again."

"So do I," Jason said.

"I'll create diverging trails, just in case we are being followed. You two should get underway. Crossing the valley will require much of the day. Safe journey."

"Safe journey," Rachel replied, giving Ferrin a hug.

\* \* \*

Two or three hours of daylight remained when Rachel and Jason arrived at the foot of the road that climbed from the valley floor to the gates of Trensicourt atop the plateau. Neatly paved with red, square stones, the road rested on ingeniously constructed abutments braced against the face of the plateau. Jason had never witnessed a comparable feat of engineering. The precarious road was wide enough for large wagons to pass each other as they ascended or descended without bothering the foot traffic progressing along the railed walkways at either side.

By the time Jason reached the city gates atop the steep roadway, his calves burned. He felt relieved to find the great gates open wide, allowing traffic to move freely in and out. The guards at the gate, wearing feathered helmets and clutching tall halberds, paid him and Rachel no special attention as they entered.

Once through the gates they advanced up a cobblestone street overshadowed by tall, closely packed buildings. They came to a square with a fountain at the center. The majority of the water spouted from the upturned mouth of a hefty stone man struggling with armfuls of bulky fish. Lesser sprays of water issued from the mouths of the fish.

At the end of one long avenue rose a wide marble building with a golden dome surmounted by a slender spire. In the other direction loomed the castle, topped by pennants rippling in a breeze that Jason could not feel down in the square.

The crowd in the square milled about, a mixture of peddlers hawking their wares, shoppers dickering for better prices, farmers driving wagons or pulling handcarts, and an occasional fashionably appointed carriage slicing through the throng.

Jason noticed three scruffy boys dashing through the crowd, playing tag. They looked about ten years old. "Hey, come here," Jason said to a skinny one with big ears as he dashed by. The boy reluctantly answered the summons, and his two friends took off.

"What is it?" the boy asked uncomfortably.

"Do you know the way to the Fleabed?" Jason asked.

The boy glared, eyes darting between Jason and Rachel. "Got nothing better to do than mock strangers?"

"We're not teasing," Rachel said. "We're looking for Nicholas Dangler."

"The Dangler?" the boy chuckled. "Somebody dare you to knock at his door?"

"Something like that," Jason replied.

"Everyone knows where the Dangler lives," the boy said. "Leastways everyone who's ever set foot in the Fleabed. I'm not from the Fleabed myself, but I could find the Dangler's door easy enough."

"Two drooma?" Jason asked, taking the cue.

The boy brightened. "At your service." Jason handed over two pellets, and the boy stared at them as if he held diamonds. When the boy awakened from his temporary trance, the pellets disappeared into a pocket. "Follow me."

The nimble boy led Jason and Rachel away from the castle, toward the huge domed building. After traveling several blocks, they left the main avenue, soon veering to continue south beyond the enormous domed structure. They entered a maze of narrow, filthy streets and alleys. The buildings began to look like poorly stacked boxes. Furtive eyes peered through boarded windows, and lonely figures dressed in layers of worn clothing roamed the alleyways. Jason kept a

wary eye on the people around them. Beneath his cloak one hand remained on his knife.

The boy led them around a battered lean-to in the mouth of an alley, where an old woman huddled behind a curtain of tattered rags. On one side of the alley a single solid building stood in contrast to the haphazardly overhanging levels on the opposite side. A gang of thin urchins scattered as Jason and Rachel followed the boy forward.

The boy stopped and pointed. "Up on the left is the Dangler's door. Whether you knock is up to you. Will you need help finding your way out of here?"

"I think we've got it," Jason said, unsure how long they might converse with Nicholas Dangler. He figured he could always hire another guide.

The boy looked up expectantly.

Jason fished out another drooma. "Thanks."

The boy stashed the pellet away and dashed off without another word. Rachel stepped nearer to Jason. "Is this safe?" she murmured.

"Has anything been safe?" Jason replied, his eyes following the boy as he ran away. "It makes me sad to think of all the kids growing up here."

"I can't think about that," Rachel said, her eyes misting up.

Jason sighed. "At least the Dangler's door leads to a sturdy building."

"There aren't many in the neighborhood," Rachel agreed. "I'm surprised this part of the city hasn't collapsed into the alleys."

"Let's knock." Jason approached the door and tapped it three times with his knuckles. The heaviness of the door dampened the sound. After waiting for several seconds, he knocked again, pounding this time.

"Maybe he's not home," Rachel said after a moment.

As Jason knocked a third time, locks disengaged, and the door whipped inward. A woman stood there, nearly his height, her shoulders broad, her dark hair tied back. She wore a sleeveless tunic, her bare arms plump with muscle. "What do you want?" the woman asked.

"We're looking for Nicholas Dangler," Jason said.

Her challenging eyes shifted from Jason to Rachel and back. "Nicholas is ill; he can't abide visitors. If you want to commission work, I am running his enterprise. We could set up a consultation."

"We specifically need to speak with Nicholas," Rachel said.

"Then you should have visited years ago," the woman responded.

"Please," Jason persisted. "We're strangers to this city. We really need his help. Galloran sent us."



The woman sneered. "Your ridicule lacks invention." She slammed the sturdy door.

"Should you have brought up Galloran?" Rachel asked.

"Jugard said that Nicholas used to work for Galloran," Jason replied. "The problem is she thinks we're kidding." Slipping a hand into a pocket, he knocked again.

"Careful," Rachel said. "She looked like she could beat you up."

After a few bursts of knocking, Jason began to incessantly pound. When the door opened again, the woman held a sword. Behind her an older, smaller woman leveled a fancy crossbow at Jason.

"Walk away," the broad-shouldered woman suggested. "Do not force us to use violence."

Jason held up the ring Galloran had given him. "I am Jason, Lord of Caberton. The title came to me from Galloran. It seemed like you didn't believe me."

The smaller woman lowered her crossbow somewhat. The larger woman held out her free hand. "Let me examine the ring."

"It stays on my finger," Jason said, holding it up for her inspection. The last thing he needed was for the woman to take the ring and slam the door again.

The woman stepped forward and gazed at the ring. Jason twisted his hand so she could inspect different angles. Her interest shifted from the ring to Jason. He returned her stare. Despite her hard features she was not unattractive. The woman glanced up and down the alley. "Step inside."

Jason and Rachel passed through the doorway. The large woman shut the door, fastening multiple locks.

The shorter woman spoke. "I'm Kayla. This is my daughter, Minna."

"My sister, Rachel," Jason said, gesturing.

"I cannot guarantee an interview with Nicholas," Kayla said. "Do you mind waiting while I inquire?"

"Not a bit," Jason said.

The bare room had three strong doors besides the entrance—one to the left, one to the right, and one straight back. Kayla went through the door opposite the entrance.

"Forgive my abruptness," Minna said, the sword still in her hand. "Youngsters get dared to rap on our door, so when we answer, we normally find children running away. We make appointments for our business dealings. We have

weathered numerous attempts to harm and disgrace Nicholas. These are uncertain times.”

“I understand,” Jason said. “We mean no harm.”

“Any mention of Galloran will likely bring harm,” Minna said uneasily.

Kayla returned. “Nicholas will see the two of you immediately.” Jason and Rachel followed Kayla. As Minna moved to accompany them, Kayla held up a hand. “You will not be needed.”

“We haven’t searched them,” Minna complained.

“Nicholas was explicit,” Kayla said.

“That doesn’t make him right,” Minna grouched. Kayla led Jason and Rachel down a short hallway. She motioned toward the door at the end of the hall. “Right through there.”

Jason and Rachel passed Kayla and walked into a spacious room crowded with workbenches, tables, tools, plans, and diverse contraptions in various stages of development. A graying man hanging in a leather harness glided toward them, suspended from an overhead track that snaked around the room. The man had no legs.

Tugging a strap, the man stopped sliding a pace from Jason, his body swinging in the harness. “Let’s see the ring.”

Jason offered him the ring. The man accepted it and removed a jeweler’s loupe from a pouch in his harness. Staring through the lens, he studied the ring closely before handing it back. Apart from his lack of legs the man had a stout build. In fact, he looked vaguely familiar.

“Are you Nicholas?” Rachel asked.

“I am. And you claim to be called Jason and Rachel.” He fixed Jason with a shrewd gaze. “How did you really obtain this ring?”

“Directly from Galloran,” Jason said. “He personally named me Lord of Caberton.”

“When?”

“About a week ago.”

“Were you there?” Nicholas asked Rachel.

“Yes.”

“And you expect me to believe you? Where did this happen?”

“I’m not sure we have the right to tell you,” Jason said carefully.

Nicholas frowned. “What do you imposters want from me? If you came to kill me, there will be no more opportune moment to strike.”

“We’re not here to kill you,” Rachel said.

“Good,” Nicholas said, using his eyes to draw their attention to a strap he was holding. “One yank and I could pierce the two of you with a dozen arrows each.”

Jason looked around the room, but could not see any bows ready to fire.

“They’re concealed,” Nicholas said. “I’m not bluffing. If you’re not assassins, what are you?”

Jason decided to lay his cards on the table. “We’re Beyonders. We were told you can help us find a word that might destroy Maldor.”

Nicholas blanched. “How could you know about the Word? Who sent you?”

“Galloran,” Rachel said. “More accurately Jugard, a man Galloran sent us to speak with.”

Nicholas regarded them cautiously.

“You look a little like one of Galloran’s men,” Rachel said. “Brin the Gamester.”

Nicholas glowered. “If you mean Brin of Rosbury, you had best be speaking the truth.”

Jason now understood why Nicholas had appeared familiar. He did look like Brin.

“He never mentioned the name Rosbury,” Rachel said. “He called himself Brin the Gamester.”

“Brin was my youngest brother,” Nicholas replied. “Did Galloran give you anything else?”

Jason showed the poniard to Nicholas, who examined the weapon, peering closely at the blossom that could eject the blade. “This appears authentic. It bears one of Galloran’s seals, and it could certainly be the work of Brin.”

Rachel pulled out her crystal sphere.

“Orantium?” Nicholas spluttered. “You could have shown me that first! It is almost better evidence than the ring. And you know about the Word . . . You say you are Beyonders?”

“We came to your world about two weeks ago,” Jason said.

“Did Galloran bring you?” Nicholas inquired.

“No, but he knew the people who summoned us,” Rachel said. “A woman, Erinda, and some musicians, the Giddy Nine.”

“Already you pursue the Word?” Nicholas asked.

“The first place I went was the Repository of Learning,” Jason said. “I learned the first syllable from *The Book of Salzared*.”

“Have you discovered other syllables?” Nicholas asked.

“Two of the six,” Rachel responded. “The first and the fourth. Can you help us?”

Nicholas sighed, glancing down at his harness. “Your words kindle memories of better days. Once I was Nicholas of Rosbury. Like my forefathers I served as chief engineer for the kingdom of Trensicourt. Now I am Nicholas Dangler, a maimed tinkerer hiding in the poorest district of a city my ancestors designed and constructed.”

“Do you know any of the syllables?” Jason asked.

Nicholas closed his eyes, pain flashing across his features. “If Galloran lives, why has he neglected me? I am among the minority who have remained faithful! If Brin lives, how could he let us mourn him? We have lost so much!”

Jason felt torn—he would have expected Nicholas to react with joy at hearing that Brin and Galloran were alive. In Lyrian people’s perspectives sometimes seemed stuck on the negative. So many of those he met seemed broken and hopeless.

“Galloran is blind,” Rachel explained. “He was tormented by Maldor, and his mind suffered. He can’t remember much about the Word, although he collected most of the syllables. Who knows what else he may have forgotten?”

“What of Brin?” Nicholas asked. “Is he well?”

“He seemed healthy,” Rachel said. “He’s helping watch over Galloran.”

“You cannot tell me where they dwell?” Nicholas pressed.

“I don’t think it’s our secret to tell,” Jason said. “Galloran has kept his identity a mystery. He goes by another name.”

“I never envisioned him a free man in hiding,” Nicholas murmured. “He was indomitable. I assumed Galloran was dead or in prison.”

“He was in prison,” Rachel said. “But not anymore.”

“I do not know any of the actual syllables,” Nicholas sighed. “But before I was ruined, Galloran confided some secrets to me about the Word. The third syllable resides here in Trensicourt, inscribed in the royal lorevault, above the entrance, fourth word from the left. Another lies on the island in the center of Whitelake. And I know that *The Book of Salzared* inside the Repository of Learning holds the first syllable.”

“How do we get into the lorevault?” Jason asked.

Nicholas chuckled. “It’s nearly impossible. Only two men are allowed inside the lorevault—the regent and the chancellor.”

“Who are those guys?” Jason asked.

“Galloran was the last of the royal heirs to disappear,” Nicholas said. “The regent, Dolan of Vernasett, rules in place of the king. For years the nobles have desired to formally crown Dolan, but the people still believe the royal line survives in hiding, and the nobles fear a revolt.”

“Would the regent let us into the lorevault?” Rachel asked.

“Never,” Nicholas spat. “Dolan would hunt you as ardently as Maldor if he knew of your quest. And the chancellor, a man called Copernum, is even more treacherous. Although officially Trensicourt remains a free kingdom, our regent, our chancellor, and virtually all of our nobility have quietly brokered deals with the emperor. They pay him tribute, and they obey his secret commands, which explains why Trensicourt remains untouched while battle rages in the east. Just you wait. After the great kingdom of Kadara falls, our aristocracy will hand Trensicourt over to Maldor without an ounce of blood spilled.”

“Won’t the people rebel?” Jason asked.

“Possibly,” Nicholas conceded. “Which explains why Trensicourt is not already another of Maldor’s fiefdoms. The nobles placate the populace by assuring them that our neutrality will shield us from conflict, that we have sufficient respect from the emperor to forever remain independent so long as we do not openly defy him.”

“But you have your doubts,” Rachel said.

“Maldor’s ambition knows no limits,” Nicholas assured her. “He plans wisely, fighting one battle at a time. He does not want Trensicourt involved as he conquers the remainder of the continent. Aside from the Seven Vales of the Amar Kabal, our kingdom boasts the best defenses in Lyrian. Taking Trensicourt by force would be an arduous task, even for the vast armies of the emperor. Should we elect to oppose him, we could raise a mighty host. Maldor wants to reserve Trensicourt for the end. Given his increasing hold on our ruling class, the mightiest kingdom of Lyrian may eventually prove the easiest to topple.”

“All of this could change if we destroy Maldor with the Word,” Jason said thoughtfully.

Nicholas fiddled with a buckle on his harness. “Galloran hoped to undermine our enemies with a single lethal stroke. I believe he shared secrets of the Word with me in the hope that I would follow in his footsteps if he failed. I tried. I knew that my first step would be to gain access to the lorevault. I challenged Copernum to a battle of wits, with the chancellorship in the balance. I lost. As

punishment I was stripped of my title, Earl of Rosbury. Not long thereafter I was attacked, and I lost my legs, and with them any hope of adventuring.”

“That’s terrible!” Rachel exclaimed.

“All who remained loyal to Galloran were ousted from among the nobility,” Nicholas recounted. “False accusations, ludicrous trials, and other political maneuvering concealed the injustice in the guise of legality. Many of the best men and women of Trensicourt were defamed, impoverished, or murdered, only to be replaced by the ambitious and unscrupulous. A handful of good people have managed to pretend enough loyalty to Dolan and Copernum to avoid destruction, at the cost of their honor.”

“Have you sent others after the Word?” Rachel asked.

“My brother Roger embarked on the quest, opting to save the syllable inside the lorevault for last. He never returned. He must be dead or incarcerated. Brin followed Galloran on his early exploits and never returned. My sister, Hannah, could not endure the shame of our fall, and she married a lesser lordling who had risen to the position of count—a weak, scheming man. My two sons and one nephew perished while trying to incite a revolt against the present nobility. I live here with Kayla, the wife of my brother Roger, and her daughters Minna and Lisa. A few attendants have remained loyal to us from the early days.”

“No offense,” Rachel said, “but why have your enemies left you alive?”

“Not out of kindness,” Nicholas laughed. “I know shameful secrets about many of our present nobility. I have taken measures to ensure they know that I know. They have been promised that upon my untimely demise those secrets will be made public. Aside from blackmail I keep up my defenses, and I stay out of the way in the Fleabed. I quietly provide architectural plans and various handy devices for members of the ruling class. They believe I have learned my place, which perhaps I have. Since I humbly remain the most talented engineer in the city, charging far less than my services merit, I have my uses.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jason said.

“It could be worse,” Nicholas acknowledged. “Minna and Lisa are strapping girls, able to do much of the heavy work my designs require. I am successfully passing much of my knowledge to them. Kayla is a marvelous cook. I have no legs, but my harness suffices. I live in the Fleabed, but my residence is large and secure. My enemies rule over me, but they keep their distance. You may soon deserve my pity more than I deserve yours.”

“I won’t argue,” Jason said.

Reaching up, Nicholas grabbed a couple of straps and pulled to shift his position in the harness. "Listen, son. Do you really think you have any chance for success? Getting the Word, I mean. Once Galloran failed, the rest of us should have quit. He was our best hope. Strong, smart, brave, inspiring, incorruptible; a peerless swordsman. How could others succeed where he had failed? Honestly, when I weigh all I lost, and how little was gained by that loss, if I could return to the days after Galloran fell, I would pretend to side with Dolan."

Jason frowned. The last thing he needed was fuel for his doubts. Looking into those grave, knowing eyes, it was hard not to waver.

"Galloran warned us that we have to see this through," Rachel said. "He warned us that Maldor knew we were after the Word, and would destroy us more swiftly if we departed from our task."

"He would know," Nicholas admitted. "And Galloran is right, to an extent. However, if you earn another syllable or two, you might garner an invitation to Harthenham. If you can survive until then, you can live out your days in luxury."

"Others have mentioned Harthenham," Jason said. "What is it?"

"The emperor's pleasure palace," Nicholas explained. "Only his staunchest enemies receive an invitation to the Eternal Feast. I have never been so honored. Those who accept live out their days in paradise, all cares forgotten. These days most who pretend to oppose Maldor are motivated by hope for an invitation. Few possess enough backbone to actually earn one."

"Was Galloran invited?" Rachel asked.

"Multiple times," Nicholas said. "Ever the idealist, he turned down the invitations. Want some practical guidance? If I were walking your path, my goal would not be to gain the Word. My intent would be to succeed enough to earn an invitation to Harthenham. After that your troubles could be over. Don't delude yourself. Maldor is a master manipulator. No matter how promising your prospects appear, he will not let you succeed. You can't imagine the resources at his disposal. Galloran failed years ago, and Maldor has only gained power since. If an invitation to the Eternal Feast ever arrives, take it. Deny it, and you will feel the full wrath of Maldor. Once the emperor truly wants you out of the way, your demise will soon follow."

"Thanks for the advice," Jason said, trying not to let it shake him. "Either way, for now we have to keep after the Word. What are our chances of breaking in to the lorevault?"

“Are you the greatest master thief Lyrian has ever seen?”

“No.”

“Does some unknown magic from the Beyond allow you to walk through walls?”

“No.”

“Then you have no chance,” Nicholas said emphatically. “The lorevault was designed by my ancestors to be impervious. It has remained so for hundreds of years.”

“Don’t you know a weakness?” Rachel asked.

“On the contrary,” Nicholas said. “I am simply more aware than anyone that the lorevault has no exploitable flaws.”

“You challenged the chancellor to a battle of wits?” Jason asked.

“The office of chancellor is more vulnerable than the vault,” Nicholas conceded. “But not by much. Since ancient times any nobleman of Trensicourt may challenge the chancellor to a battle of wits. The rule helps ensure that the cleverest nobleman will serve as chief advisor to the king.”

“I’m Lord of Caberton,” Jason said. “Would that qualify me?”

“Caberton lies in shambles,” Nicholas chuckled. “But, yes, if your title were recognized as authentic, you would be qualified to challenge Copernum for the chancellorship. Be forewarned: He has been challenged thrice and never defeated. There is no end to his cunning.”

“How does the contest work?” Rachel asked.

“The challenger poses three questions. After the chancellor answers each question, the challenger can attempt to supply a superior response. If any of the challenger’s responses are judged superior, he becomes the new chancellor. If not, the challenger forfeits his title and property to the chancellor.”

“So if you lose,” Jason said, “you lose big.”

“None know the consequences better than I do,” Nicholas sighed. “Considering the risk, few have the boldness to issue a challenge for the chancellorship. The office is normally appointed by the king.”

“This seems like our only way into the vault,” Jason said. “At least in my case all I’d have to risk is a title nobody would want.”

Nicholas grinned. “Nothing would delight me more than to see Copernum humbled. It will not be easy. First you must get Dolan to recognize your claim to Caberton. The ring is authentic, and it should serve as sufficient evidence, unless they bring forward false witnesses to label you a thief. The second trick



will be actually defeating Copernum. Perhaps you know some unfathomable riddle from the Beyond?"

"I'll have to think about it," Jason said.

"I know some riddles," Rachel added.

"The question would have to be exquisite," Nicholas said. "Copernum has held his office so long for good reason. He is as keen as they come."

"Who judges the contest?" Rachel asked.

"Dolan," Nicholas said. "His word will be final. If there is room for doubt, he will side with Copernum. But if you clearly provide a superior answer, he will name you victor. Dolan knows that Copernum wields the real power in Trensicourt. I believe Dolan would gladly demote him if he could do so without blame."

"How do I establish my claim as Lord of Caberton?" Jason asked.

"You will need an audience with the regent." Nicholas sniffed and tugged absently at a strap. "You must not breathe a word about challenging for the chancellorship. Save that surprise for after your claim has been acknowledged. It would help if you found a sponsor." Nicholas bowed his head in thought.

"Could you sponsor him?" Rachel asked.

"My sponsorship would only harm his cause," Nicholas said. "In fact it should not be made public that the two of you came here for advice. If we were linked as conspirators, it would end badly for all of us. We must end this conversation soon, and you should not return."

"Does anyone know we're here?" Jason asked.

"Spies infest Trensicourt," Nicholas spat. "You must treat every person you meet as a potential traitor. Plenty of professional spies make a comfortable living in this town, not to mention the legions of casual busybodies eager to sell a secret as soon as they hear it."

"Do you think spies saw us come in here?" Rachel asked.

"Absolutely," Nicholas affirmed. "My alley is under constant observation. The watchers may not know your identities, but they know you are here. You will leave with crossbows. My models set the standard for all of Lyrian. The weapons may suffice as a legitimate reason for newcomers to Trensicourt to pay me a visit."

"Where should we go from here?" Jason asked.

"You want the legless ruin to lay out a strategy?" Nicholas chortled. His eyes grew thoughtful. "You are young, and you are strangers here. Perhaps I could help you avoid early missteps. My mistakes have taught me much. Be

forewarned—politics in Trensicourt are ruthless. No amount of planning could insulate you against all the possible pitfalls.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “We’re here. I have to try.”

Nicholas wound a loose strap tightly around his hand. “Very well. How much money do you have?”

“This will cost?” Jason asked.

“You misunderstand,” Nicholas said. “I mean to help you. The crossbows will be free, along with the advice.”

“We have a gold pellet, a silver, and some change,” Rachel said.

“Insufficient,” Nicholas sniffed. “Money and connections mean everything in Trensicourt. One often leads to the other. Since you lack connections, you will need money. I will provide it.”

“You’re too kind,” Jason said.

Nicholas snorted derisively. “I have much more money than I can use. So I will give you enough to make you dangerous to my enemies. Your risk will be tremendous; mine will be minimal. Not as generous as it may seem at first glance. Be on guard. Others will seek to use you likewise.”

“Right,” Jason said.

“You two should leave here separately,” Nicholas advised. “You lack sufficient family resemblance for discerning eyes to accept you as relatives.”

“But we really are—,” Rachel began defensively.

“No need to explain,” Nicholas interrupted. “I’m sure you have your reasons.” He looked at Jason. “Keeping Rachel with you will needlessly endanger her and make your task to establish yourself more difficult. You will depart first. An agent of mine will hire a boy to guide you to the finest tailor and the best blacksmith in the city. Visiting other top-quality merchants will diminish the significance of your visit to me, and will allow you to outfit yourself properly. You are a good-looking boy. The right clothes will improve your credibility. Appear unattached—your bachelorhood could help soften hearts and perhaps open doors.”

“What about me?” Rachel asked.

“I will hire a boy to escort you to a boarding house,” Nicholas said. “Your story will be that you are awaiting your cousin, who is due to return from Rostenburg. Invent a name. He was away working as a mercenary.”

“So I’ll just sit and wait,” Rachel said, offended.

“It will not take long for Jason to succeed or fail. You two would be wise to remain unconnected while in Trensicourt. Your enemies would gladly exploit

your relationship as a weakness. If either of you is ever asked about the other, you met on the road on your way into town. When you discovered that you both meant to purchase items from me, you decided to journey together to my shop. That is all you know about each other.”

“You say it won’t take me long?” Jason asked.

“Your final stop after the shops will be the Upturned Goblet,” Nicholas continued. “The proprietor is named Tedril. If he likes you, he could get you in front of the regent. The Upturned Goblet is the finest establishment in Trensicourt. The exorbitant prices allow only the rich and powerful to dine or sleep there. Unknown travelers rarely cross the threshold. Tedril will investigate you. If he believes you are legitimate, he will help you. If he smells a fraud, his bad opinion could ruin you.”

“How do I smell right?” Jason asked.

“Tedril savors the smell of gold and silver,” Nicholas chuckled. “Yet it will require more than riches to win his good opinion. Tell him you are descended from an old family who lost their holdings, and that you are looking to establish yourself as heir to Caberton. There are several such families, so don’t get specific. Let him wonder. Show him the ring. Tell him Galloran gave it to you, but tell it with a wink. Tell him you’re an old friend of Bartley of Wershon.”

“Who?” Jason asked.

“A turncoat who neglected his family and sold his honor to preserve his place at court. A big, friendly fool, Bartley roars when sober and thunders when drunk. He rarely comes to town, but he spends like a sailor when he does. He has a soft spot for the downtrodden, so Tedril will believe the connection.”

“Then what?” Jason asked.

“Rent a room. Let Tedril set the price, and don’t bargain. I’ll give you plenty. Then go gamble. Several nobles gamble at the Upturned Goblet. Be friendly. Lose lots of money. You will quickly find friends. Get one or two of your newfound friends to sponsor you at court. Hopefully, this will be enough to convince the regent to acknowledge your title.”

“What about the competition?” Jason asked.

“Challenge the chancellor within a week after receiving your title,” Nicholas said. “A novice attempting to navigate the politics of the upper class in Trensicourt will not survive for long.”

“Do you know a question that might stump him?” Rachel asked.

“If I could stump him, I would not have lost my title. You must be able to prove the correctness of your answer. And it must not be some trivial trick, like

asking how many fingers you are holding up behind your back. You'll need a question the other man could answer, and your superior response must be verifiable."

"Like a riddle," Jason said. "Or a fact. What if I asked him to name the first syllable of the Word that could destroy Maldor?"

Rocking in his harness, Nicholas let out a violent burst of laughter. "It would almost be worth it, to see the looks on their faces. None of them would know such a word existed. You would have no evidence. Nevertheless, in fear that the word might exist, the contest would end immediately, and you would disappear. Maldor would inevitably get involved. You, Rachel, me, Tedril—we'd all be slain. Along with many, if not all, of those who heard your words at court. While eliminating some of my old enemies, such an outburst would only hasten the downfall of Trensicourt."

"Then I probably shouldn't mention that I'm a Beyonder, either," Jason said.

"Not unless you fancy instantaneous imprisonment," Nicholas agreed. "You understand the parameters. My best efforts to topple Copernum failed, and the one time I advised another challenger, he failed as well. How you defeat Copernum is up to you."

"Can't I help him?" Rachel asked.

"If you have ideas, share them now," Nicholas said. "Jason should never contact me again, and you should avoid him as well until his business in Trensicourt is through."

"Remember any outstanding riddles?" Jason asked.

Rachel shook her head. "I don't know. The more you take away from me, the bigger I become."

"A hole," Nicholas said. "We have a similar riddle here."

Rachel scrunched her brow. "Twins stand at a fork in the road. One always tells the truth; the other always lies. One road leads to prosperity, the other to destruction. You can only ask one question to one of the twins. What question do you ask to find the right road?"

"I think I've heard this one," Jason said. "I can't remember the answer."

Nicholas stared down, lips moving without making a sound. Then he cleared his throat. "I ask either man which road his brother would tell me will lead to prosperity; then I take the opposite road."

"You know that one?" Rachel asked.

"No, I used reason," Nicholas said. "A riddle like this is not a bad idea, but Copernum is better at reasoning than I am. No matter what tactics you use, it

will be difficult to flummox him.”

“If I fail, all I lose is my title?” Jason asked.

Nicholas shrugged. “And your life, unless you hurry away from Trensicourt. For a newcomer who has defied Copernum, to remain in Trensicourt after failure would be fatal. He will want to make an example of you. Of course, after success your life will be almost equally endangered.”

“And even if I beat him,” Jason said, “Copernum only loses the office of chancellor.”

“He’ll maintain all other privileges and titles,” Nicholas confirmed. “And after three months he will have the right to challenge you as you challenged him.”

“I have more riddles,” Rachel volunteered.

She rattled off several, and Nicholas answered all of them. Jason could not have guessed the answer to most of them, and he began to lose faith that he could possibly succeed where Nicholas and others had failed.

When Rachel ran out of riddles, Jason cleared his throat. “Could I speak with Rachel in private for a moment?”

“By all means,” Nicholas said. Tugging on a pair of straps, he glided away on his track to a far corner of the room.

Rachel leaned her head close to Jason. “What do you think?” she whispered.

“I think we’ll never get another chance like this,” Jason replied quietly. “With the money and advice from Nicholas I’ll have a real chance of challenging Copernum.”

“But can you beat him?”

“I’ll never know unless I try. If I can get inside the lorevault, we’ll have half the syllables. You gave me some good riddles. And I’ll think hard between now and when I issue the challenge. Do you mind splitting up?”

“No. If all else fails, we’ll meet up where Ferrin suggested, at the Stumbling Stag.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Not far down the broad avenue from the castle gates, the Upturned Goblet rose five stories tall, the massive stone structure receding from the street with each level to accommodate terraced balconies. Ornamental battlements and a trio of proud flagpoles crowned the building. A great paved hallway opened onto the street, enabling carriages to access a sheltered entrance.

With twilight fading, Jason entered and crossed a plush foyer to an ornate door on the far side. His new clothes felt too silky, but they fit him well. He tried to carry himself with confidence, as if certain he belonged here. A short man in a well-tailored outfit stood before a burly guard wearing a sword. “And who might you be, sir?” the short man inquired politely.

“I am Lord Jason of Caberton.”

The man examined Jason suspiciously for a moment, eyes roving up and down. He seemed reluctantly satisfied.

The short man escorted Jason into an elegant common room, where richly dressed patrons dined on fine plates and drank from stemware. He led Jason to where a swarthy man with his hair slicked back stood conversing with an older couple seated before plates of half-eaten fish.

“Master Tedril, may I introduce Lord Jason of Caberton,” the short man announced, interrupting the conversation.

“Lord Jason,” greeted Tedril, making a much more obvious inspection of Jason’s apparel than the short man had, “a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He nodded at the short man, who scurried away. Then Tedril turned to the dining couple. “If you will excuse me.”

“By all means,” the seated man said.

“This way.” Tedril led Jason out of the common room and into a cozy office with a fruitwood desk and three wingback armchairs. Thick maroon carpeting covered the floor.

Tedril motioned for Jason to take a seat.

“I was unaware that anyone held the title of Caberton,” Tedril said casually.

"I gained the title in the wilderness," Jason said, trying his best to sound sophisticated. The ring was on his finger, but to avoid seeming desperate or defensive, Jason made no motion to call attention to it.

"I see. How novel. A stranger to Trensicourt suddenly ranks among our nobility."

"My parents are not strangers to Trensicourt," Jason lied, his voice resolute.

Tedril held his eyes, weighing him. "The regent has recognized your claim?"

"Not yet."

"Perhaps I could be of service. How long do you intend to stay here?"

"A few days, at least," Jason said. "I would be happy to pay in advance."

"For a stranger without credit a two-hundred-drooma deposit would be appropriate."

Nicholas had schooled Jason in the currency. The gold pellets were worth a hundred drooma, the silver fifty. Two hundred drooma was a small fortune. Jason removed two gold pellets from his new money bag. The innkeeper accepted the payment, offering no sign that he was impressed.

"I've been traveling," Jason said. "It will be a relief to sleep in a bed."

"Have I met your parents?" Tedril asked.

"You would know their names. But we should not discuss them yet. They intend to join me here in time."

"I have fond memories of many exiles. You bear a resemblance to the former Baron of Leramy."

Jason shrugged. "I'm not supposed to comment."

Tedril smiled knowingly. "The public misunderstood the motives of the baron. Some called his actions treasonous. Others foresaw how he might be operating for the good of the kingdom. He simply acted too soon, before the monarchy had truly waned. How did you secure the title Lord of Caberton?"

"Galloran, of course," Jason said lightly. "He gave the title to my father in prison. My father kept it a secret. With his health failing, he recently passed the title to me. Unlike him I intend to claim my privileges."

"A fascinating story," Tedril said indulgently. "How did you come to hear of the Upturned Goblet?"

"The Viscount Bartley of Wershon recommends you."

Tedril brightened. "You are a friend of the viscount's?"

"I have met him."

"How fortunate," Tedril enthused. "Are you aware he is currently abiding with us?"

“I was not,” Jason said, hoping his smile looked less brittle than it felt.

Tedril grinned as if certain this was all part of some prearranged strategy. “Come with me.”

As Jason followed Tedril out of the room, he groaned inwardly. The innkeeper had been accepting his story. Why had he mentioned Bartley? The fake reference had been part of the plan, but with the conversation going well, it had probably become unnecessary. Jason tried to stay calm. His only hope was to try to bluff his way through this.

They walked across the dining room and down a wood-paneled hallway, then mounted carpeted stairs to a room with a small bar in the corner and a fire blazing inside a green marble fireplace. Several men stood around a long felt table casting dice. A big man whose wavy red hair fell to his shoulders slapped his thigh and let out a booming laugh. A few of the other men groaned.

“Viscount Wershon,” Tedril said.

The red-haired man turned, smiling.

“You remember Lord Jason of Caberton.”

“Caberton, you say?” Bartley repeated boisterously, staring blankly at Jason.

Jason felt like a fool. So far only Bartley was facing him—the other men remained occupied with the gaming table. His little gamble to establish credibility was about to destroy it. Holding Bartley’s gaze, Jason winked.

“Yes, Jason, my friend, how have you been?”

Jason could breathe again. “Quite well.”

Bartley strode over and put an arm around his shoulders. “Walk with me, my friend, so we can reminisce. Excuse us.”

Jason did not look back at Tedril.

Bartley guided Jason to a neighboring room.

“So who in the blazes are you?” Bartley asked in a husky whisper. His breath reeked of spicy sausages.

“My family was exiled years ago. I’m here to help us regain some respect. I really am Lord of Caberton.” Jason held up the ring.

Bartley squinted. “So it would seem.”

“I’m hoping the regent will confirm me Lord of Rubble.”

Bartley laughed explosively and slapped Jason on the back hard enough to knock him off balance. “Caberton is a start. You’re dressed well. Your family had reserves?”

“I have money.”

“You enjoy gaming?”



"I've never been a careful person."

"You play Bones?"

"I don't know the game."

Bartley paused. "But you have money?"

"Yes."

Bartley threw an arm around him. "This is a dream! A young, well-funded novice! I wish we were playing Knuckles! Tomorrow, perhaps. Come, join us." Bartley released the embrace but gripped Jason's elbow, pausing, his eyes suddenly sober. "But first you must tell me how you acquired the ring. It's authentic."

"My father spent time in prison with Galloran."

"No, really, the truth."

"My father bought it," Jason confided quietly.

"Bought it?" Bartley asked, his grip tightening.

"Right. I don't know all of the details. The merchant claimed it truly came from a prisoner who spent time with Galloran."

Bartley released his elbow. "Galloran," he whispered, looking haunted. "Did any knowledge come with the ring?"

"I have no reason to think Galloran survived," Jason said, since it seemed to be what Bartley needed to hear. "I plan to say my father was the prisoner who received the title and the ring. The real story could weaken my claim."

"You're too free with your information," Bartley said, recovering.

"My parents thought I could count on you," Jason said. "I decided to roll the dice."

Bartley harrumphed. "Right, the dice. Off we go." Bartley began walking, motioning for Jason to follow. "Bones can feel complicated at first. Two shooters. One shoots for the house, one for himself. Players can bet in several ways. Stay close to me; you'll catch on. You have bronze?"

"Gold and silver, mostly."

Bartley grinned. "I can make change for you."

Jason joined the men around the table. Bartley introduced him as Lord of Caberton. The house shooter wore a black vest with gold embroidery. He rolled a pair of ten-sided dice, one black and one white. The other man, a simpering gentleman wearing white gloves, threw a similar pair of dice, except one was blue and the other yellow.

Jason stuck to bets with decent odds. He won a bit, started betting more boldly, then lost a lot, falling more than a hundred drooma below even. After a

risky bet paid off amid laughter and applause, he was back up two hundred and fifty.

The men laughed and shouted as money was won and lost. Sometime late in the evening Tedril reappeared. He seemed utterly won over. He gave Jason a key and told him a servant would see him to his room once he was ready. Jason could hardly hear the innkeeper over the commotion. Tedril promised to help acquaint him with the city and schedule an audience with the regent. A man in a fancy coat waved Tedril away, draping an arm about Jason's shoulders in mindless camaraderie.

Jason's winnings climbed to nearly three hundred before plummeting. He quit when he was fifty drooma above even, and left with Bartley.

"You fared well tonight," Bartley blustered. His face was flushed, almost matching his hair. "You won and lost more than some men ever see. As did I. But we both came out ahead of the house, and that is cause for celebration."

"Thanks for introducing me to the others."

"I'll vouch for you at court as well. The last twenty years have been hard on many families. Everyone deserves a second chance. Tell me, who are your parents?"

"They instructed me to confirm nothing to anyone, even you."

Bartley grunted. "Probably wise. You ever play Knuckles?"

"No."

Bartley grinned. "The finest card game ever devised! We'll see whether you can still afford my friendship after tomorrow. Ha! I'm jesting. We'll set reasonable limits. Good night, Lord Jason." He shambled off down a hall.

Jason pulled out his key and stopped a servant. "Could you show me to my room?"

"By all means, Lord Caberton."

At his door Jason tipped the man five drooma, and the servant regarded him in grateful awe. Once again Jason surmised that people in Lyrian must not tip very well.

The spacious room was nicely furnished. A set of doors opened onto a veranda with a wicker table and chairs. Jason crossed to a full-length mirror and examined himself. Days of travel had melted some fat from his frame, leaving his face leaner and more sharply defined. His new attire did look princely, although he imagined his friends from the baseball team would beat him up if they ever saw him dressed this way.

Sitting at his desk, Jason examined the contents of his knapsack. His money bag contained nine gold drooma and twelve silver, along with many new bronze pellets after gambling. More important than money, he had won acceptance at the Upturned Goblet. But how would he find a question to defeat a man such as Copernum?

Closing his eyes, Jason tried to imagine what might baffle the chancellor. Judging from the description Nicholas had given, it would be nearly impossible. Rachel knew lots of riddles, but Jason doubted that would be the best road. He needed trivial details, things a smart man might still miss. But what?

He knew some good trivia from biology class. He knew that the tip of the sternum was called the xiphoid process. He knew that flexing the foot upward was dorsiflexion, and downward was plantar flexion. He knew the cheekbone was called the zygomatic arch.

But who knew if anatomy had been classified the same way here in Lyrian? Who knew if anatomical details had been classified at all? And if they had, a learned man like Chancellor Copernum would probably know them.

He could think of some tough questions. Does a tree make a sound when it falls if nobody is around? How can you prove you exist? What is the meaning of life? The problem was, he not only had to stump Copernum—he had to provide a better answer.

Unsure how to force inspiration, Jason brooded miserably. Despite the late hour his frenzied mind did not feel sleepy.

\* \* \*

Four days later Jason sat anxiously in the posh compartment of a sleek black carriage alongside the Viscount Bartley of Wershon, on his way to an audience with the regent. Velvet curtains screened the city from view. He wore an embroidered doublet, breeches that ballooned around his thighs, crimson stockings, and simple black shoes as soft as slippers. In his lap rested an overgrown beret with a crimson plume. He might have suspected the outfit was a joke had Bartley not worn similar attire.

A tailor had come to his room two days ago to measure him for the costume, then delivered the outfit the following morning. Despite the gaudy appearance, his clothes felt surprisingly comfortable.

Over the past few days Jason had lost nearly four hundred drooma gambling, most of it playing Knuckles, much of it to Bartley. He had spent another couple hundred on food and additional clothing.

Jason had used all of his free time to consider riddles and questions. Some of the riddles Jason remembered were silly jokes from his childhood. What's easy to catch but hard to throw? A cold. Why did the baby cross the road? It was stapled to the chicken. What do you get when you cross a cactus and a porcupine? Sore hands.

He felt most hopeful about some odd bits of trivia he had recalled, but still none of his ideas seemed like a reliable bet. He wished he had an Internet connection to his world!

The ride from the Upturned Goblet to the castle was brief. Before long the carriage clattered through the gates, and a footman helped them down.

"You will enter through the audience gate," Bartley said. "I will await you inside. See you soon."

Jason followed a liveried servant into the castle. They passed down a vaulted hallway. Ornate pilasters adorned the walls at regular intervals. Gold scrollwork embellished the ceiling. Enormous urns, intricately painted, dwarfed the rigid guards positioned along the immense corridor.

Jason and his liveried escort came to a heavy pair of bronze doors flanked by guards in ostentatious uniforms, complete with bandoleers, medals, epaulets, and ridiculously tall hats. The guards kept their gazes fixed down the hall, blinking infrequently, and never looked at Jason.

Another man waited outside the door. He wore a pointed hat and a long silk cape. A voice from behind the doors cried out, "Yosef, son of Pontiv." The doors swung outward. The pointy-hat guy entered, and the doors closed.

The servant stood silently beside Jason. The guards stared solemnly at the empty hall. Jason tried to calm himself. Obviously, the grandeur of the hall was meant to intimidate visitors. He tried not to stress. The best thing he could do if he wanted his claim recognized was to stay calm and look like he belonged.

"The purported Lord Jason of Caberton," echoed a voice from inside the chamber. The bronze doors swung outward. A long blue carpet edged in silver led across the polished stone floor toward the dais, where the regent sat upon a great ivory chair. Crowds of elegantly arrayed courtiers clustered in groups off to either side. A portly old fellow with plump, healthy features, the regent looked much more like a real king than Galloran. A bejeweled circlet rested on his head. Rings glittered on his fingers. His fine raiment was a rich purple trimmed in gold.

Jason advanced along the carpet to where it stopped at a raised, circular piece of marble directly before the throne. Jason stood upon the pedestal. Bartley had

informed him it was called the Petitioner's Wheel. It gave an individual on the floor of the throne room the right to address the regent. Only those upon the dais shared the right to address Dolan directly. Currently two men stood upon the dais beside the regent, one dressed as a soldier, the other wearing long blue robes and an oversized tricornered hat, with a silver mantle wrapped about his narrow shoulders.

Standing upon the Petitioner's Wheel, Jason looked up silently at the regent. Bartley had cautioned him to wait for Dolan to speak first.

"Greetings, young man," Dolan said. "You claim the title of Caberton?"

"I do, sire." According to Bartley, "sire" and "Your Highness" were the forms of address etiquette demanded for the occasion. "Your Majesty" was reserved for the king.

"Hold forth your right hand."

Jason complied.

"Sound the tone."

A hollow metal tube, like a giant chime, hung from a chain off to one side of the throne. The man dressed like a soldier struck the long tube with a hammer, producing a deep, penetrating tone. Jason could feel his teeth vibrating. The ring on his finger began to glow, as did one of the regent's rings. Glancing around the room, Jason observed many other rings glowing, including a ring upon Bartley's hand.

The tone dwindled, and the light faded from the rings.

"Who bequeathed this title to you?" the regent asked.

"My father, who received the title from Galloran."

Courtiers leaned together, whispering soundlessly.

"While he lived," the regent said, "Galloran bestowed many titles. Though he was never king himself, with his enfeebled father, the honored King Dromidus, trapped in a cataleptic stupor, it became his right to manage the affairs of the kingdom. Yet I do not recall him bequeathing the title of Caberton, once that line failed."

"It happened twelve years ago. Galloran granted the title to my father in prison, who passed it to me."

The regent nodded. "Twelve years ago Galloran adventured abroad. Since he never returned, he could well have granted a title in the field without many knowing it. You do in fact wear the signet ring of Caberton, which Galloran had in his possession. Who was your father?"

“I do not wish to mention him,” Jason said. “He was in prison, an enemy to the emperor, and I have chosen to distance myself from him.”

“Even though he passed the title to you?” the man in the tricornered hat spoke up.

“He passed me the title to a heap of stones for three sacks of flour,” Jason said, using a story Bartley had helped him prepare. “He was not man enough to make something of the opportunity. I will be. I intend to found a new line and to serve Trensicourt well.”

“Will any man vouch for young Jason?” the regent asked.

Bartley raised a hand. Two others, both of whom Jason recognized from playing Bones and Knuckles, also raised their hands.

“Very well,” the regent said. “Jason, do you solemnly swear fealty to the Crown of Trensicourt and to all agents of the Crown?”

“I do.”

“In times of war and peace, through hours of need and years of prosperity, will you defend Trensicourt in word, thought, and deed for as long as you live?”

“I will.”

“Your title is recognized, Lord Jason of Caberton. As of this moment you are free to stand in court when visiting Trensicourt. I fear your holdings are in considerable disrepair . . .”

At this point a titter ran through the assemblage.

“. . . but the few artifacts in my treasury pertaining to Caberton shall be restored to you. And land is land. Make it blossom. Have you any other inquiry?”

Something small pelted Jason in the back of his head. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a pretty young woman in an attractive dress trying to mouth something at him. It was Rachel, her short hair hidden under a fancy, flat-topped hat. Stunned to see her, he tried to read her lips. *Now*, she kept repeating silently, interspersed with a few other less decipherable words. Her imploring eyes glanced assertively at the dais.

“Has something else captured your attention?” the regent asked politely.

The crowd snickered.

Jason faced forward. “I beg your pardon, Your Highness. I have one other request. I would like to challenge Chancellor Copernum for the chancellorship.”

The room exploded with reactions, a clamor of gasps and exclamations. The regent looked thunderstruck. Betraying no surprise, the thin man in the

tricornered hat measured Jason with calculating eyes.

“Come to order,” the soldier on the dais proclaimed. “We will have order, or I shall clear the chamber.”

Jason felt dizzy. He hoped he had understood Rachel correctly. How had she gotten here?

The regent spoke as the courtiers quieted.

“Such is your right, as a lord of the realm. When do you propose to hold this contest?”

“As soon as possible,” Jason said.

The regent turned to the brooding man in the tricornered hat. “What say you, Chancellor? Have you any objection to pursuing this challenge in summary fashion?”

Copernum narrowed his eyes. “I have no objection to annexing further holdings, however meager, to my own.”

The regent nodded. “Very well. After a twenty-minute recess Lord Jason of Caberton shall compete with Chancellor Copernum for the chancellorship. You may step down, Lord Jason.”

Jason stepped off the wheel. He watched Copernum, who had turned and was retreating through a door at one side of the dais. The slightly stooped man had a weak chin and a long, narrow nose, giving him an aerodynamic profile.

“Well,” Bartley growled, slapping Jason on the back as he came up from behind. “Turns out I cannot read you as well as our card games have led me to suppose. You are full of surprises! Whether you win or not, you have earned a place in history for sheer audacity!” He shook his head. “Challenging for the chancellorship seconds after the regent recognizes your title—an unprecedented move.”

“You have your questions ready?” asked another man. It was the fellow with the fancy coat from the Bones game. He had been one of the men who vouched for Jason along with Bartley.

“I think so,” Jason said. “Unless you have any brilliant questions to share.”

“No offense,” Bartley grumbled, “but we are going to keep our distance. No man in Trensicourt can afford to make an enemy of Copernum.”

“How long has it been since somebody challenged him?” Jason asked.

“Ten years,” Bartley said. “That was when he stripped rank and title from the Earl of Geer.”

“Give us a preview,” the other man urged. “What do you mean to throw at him?”

“You’ll see,” Jason said, still not certain himself. “Do you have any advice? What are typical questions?”

Bartley shrugged. “Events from history. Strategies. Riddles. It depends. Copernum has betrayed no weakness. He knows history as if he lived it. He is a master strategist. And he solves riddles like he composed them. We should leave you to your thoughts.”

Rachel approached as the other men walked away. “How are you?” she asked.

“Confused,” Jason said. “What are you doing here?”

“Long story,” she replied. “We have to watch what we say. There’s no safe place to talk.”

“Did you come up with any good questions?” he asked.

She moved closer and spoke more softly, her hand over her mouth. “Yes, actually. A great question. Which is why I went to see our dangling friend. He agreed that the question could help us. He had been doing some investigating through his own spies, and he discovered that Copernum already had his eye on the three of us, especially you. One of your gambling friends is one of the chancellor’s top spies. He knows we’re connected, and he might even know something about our quest.”

“Great,” Jason said. “What do we do?”

“You did it,” Rachel said. “You needed to challenge him without waiting. It will be harder for him to destroy us if you beat him. And if you lose, we just do what we would have done anyhow. Escape Trensicourt immediately.” She handed him an envelope.

“What’s this?” Jason asked.

“Open it when the contest starts,” she said. “It has some questions.”

“Why wait?” Jason wondered, examining the envelope.

“Just in case,” Rachel said. “According to our friend lots of people are watching you with spyglasses right now, reading your lips, observing your actions, trying to pick up clues.”

“Gotcha. How’d you get in here?”

“Our dangling friend called in some favors,” Rachel said. “We’ve been talking for too long. I have to go.”

“You’re not going to watch?”

“No. Trust me. It’s better for both of us.” She turned and vanished hurriedly into the crowd.

Nobody else drew near Jason, but he got plenty of elusive glances. He stood not far from the Petitioner’s Wheel, tapping the envelope against his palm,



wondering what questions it might contain. How had he gotten into this mess?

Over the next several minutes people poured into the throne room, claiming all of the available floor space except immediately around Jason. The galleries were mobbed, becoming a sea of expectant faces. The dais also became crowded. Jason figured he would be just as eager to witness an event like this if someone else had been willing to take the risk.

After what had to be much more than twenty minutes, the regent returned and took his seat. Copernum stood immediately beside Dolan, hands clasped behind his back, his expression proud and stern. As an attendant ushered Jason back onto the wheel, the room grew shockingly silent.

“You are certain you wish to pursue this challenge at this time?” the regent asked, staring at Jason, his demeanor graver than earlier.

“I am, sire.”

“Very well. Chancellor Copernum has waived his right to postpone the contest. I shall judge the event. You, Lord Jason, shall pose three questions. If you can supply a better answer than Chancellor Copernum to any one of the questions, you will become the new chancellor. Chancellor Copernum would retain his titles and holdings, remaining the Marquess of Jansington, the Earl of Geer, and so forth. Copernum would become eligible to challenge you for the chancellorship after the space of three months.

“Should you lose, Lord Jason, the title of Caberton will pass to Chancellor Copernum, along with all holdings and privileges pertaining to the title. Are the conditions understood?”

“Yes, sire,” Jason said, his mouth dry.

Copernum nodded.

The regent looked over at Copernum. “Have you anything to say before the contest ensues?”

“What education have you received?” Copernum asked Jason.

Jason looked around the room, unsure how to respond. “I’m almost in high school.”

People in the room shifted and murmured. Copernum glared.

“Can you authenticate this claim?” Copernum asked. “I am one of only eight men living to have graduated from the High School at Elboreth, and I am well acquainted with each of them. I know of no prospective candidates.”

“I never said the High School at Elboreth.”

“That is the only recognized High School.”

“I’ll go to a different one, called Roosevelt High School. It’s far away. I’ve traveled a lot.”

“So it would seem. Your accent has a peculiar ring. English truly suits you.” Copernum stared knowingly. Jason kept silent. “Enough banter. Good luck to you, lordling.”

“And to you,” Jason replied.

“Let the contest begin,” the regent announced. “Chancellor Copernum has fifteen minutes to respond to each question. Should he wish to challenge the worthiness of a particular question, I will have the final word. A disqualified question still counts as one of the three. Copernum retains the right to pose clarifying questions, according to my discretion. I reserve final say as to who has supplied the superior answer to each question, should any controversy arise. Lord Jason, proceed with the first inquiry.”

Jason swallowed. He wished he had a cup of water. He wondered if he should ask for one. No. Everybody was staring at him expectantly. Under the scrutiny of so many spectators he felt extraordinarily self-conscious as he tore open the envelope.

“I wrote these down to help me phrase them correctly,” Jason said nervously, scanning the words as quickly as he could.

The assemblage chuckled in sympathy.

*Question one is from our friend in Trencicourt. He said Copernum is ashamed of his father, so although he can answer this, it will provoke him and might put him off balance. Ask him the full name of his father.*

“Chancellor Copernum, what is the full name of your father?”

Copernum’s nostrils flared, his lip twitching toward a sneer.

“Is that the full question?” the regent asked.

“Yes, sire.”

The regent signaled to a man, who overturned a large hourglass.

“Come now, lordling,” Copernum condescended. “Tell me you are merely jesting, that you do not insult the renown of Roosevelt High School with inane questions such as this. Will the following question investigate my hat size? The answer is no mystery. Bridonus Keplin Dunscrip Garonicum the Ninth.”

The regent looked to Jason.

“Wait, the loremaster?” Jason asked. “At the Repository of Learning?”

Copernum’s gaze became predatory. For an instant hate flickered in his eyes. Then his expression relaxed. “Perhaps. His name is as I stated.”

“Any rebuttal?” the regent asked.

“I have nothing to add,” Jason stated.

“Copernum takes the first question,” the regent declared.

The assemblage applauded.

“Apparently, you do not fully comprehend the situation into which you have ensnarled yourself,” Copernum said. “Because of your youth, and your newness to Trensicourt, I extend the opportunity to withdraw. I am under no demands to extend such a courtesy, but you may do so if you wish. What say you?”

Jason stood frozen. After the message from Rachel he worried that if he stepped down, Copernum would arrest him or something. He had to see this through.

“That was my remedial question,” Jason said.

The crowd laughed. Even the regent had to place his hand over his mouth before ordering the room to silence.

“Your second question,” the regent prompted.

Jason glanced down at the note from Rachel.

*Question two is the awesome one I came up with. Ask Copernum about the words above the inside of the lorevault. He should have no idea this is connected to the Word, and no reason to withhold an honest answer.*

Grinning, Jason cleared his throat. “Inside the lorevault there is an inscription above the door. From left to right what is written there?”

“Is that the complete question?” the regent asked.

“Yes.”

The regent waved a hand, and a second hourglass was overturned.

Chancellor Copernum fixed Jason with a grim stare. All condescension had departed. He seemed both suspicious and wary. The searching gaze continued for a long moment. Jason tried to keep his expression neutral.

“This is a peculiar inquiry, lordling,” the chancellor finally said. “I will grant you that much. Are you suggesting you have been inside the lorevault?”

Sudden panic gripped Jason. If Copernum suspected Jason could not answer the question himself, he might refrain from responding, or give a false answer.

“My father disgraced us, but I come from an ancient family,” Jason said simply.

Speculative murmurs rippled through the room. Scowling thoughtfully, Copernum turned to the regent. “Should I respond to this question in private?”

“I see no harm in responding here. Those words are not specifically secret.”

“Very well,” Copernum said. “The words are ‘Elum Bek Nori Fex Fera Sut Copis Hostrum.’”

“How did you pronounce the fourth word?” Jason asked.

“Fex.”

“And the seventh?”

“Copis,” Copernum said impatiently.

*Fex*, Jason thought. *Fex. Fex. Fex.*

“Lord Jason?” the regent asked.

“I have nothing to add,” Jason said, mind whirling.

### A FEX EN

“The second question also goes to Chancellor Copernum,” the regent proclaimed.

Applause followed. Copernum smiled smugly.

“Enjoy your moment of notoriety, lordling,” Copernum said. “Unless your third question is considerably less sophomoric than the first two, this will be the final time you stand inside this castle.”

“Your final question, Lord Jason,” the regent said.

Jason felt a compulsion to ask, *How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?* He resisted and looked down at his paper.

*Question three is your chance to use the best of what you prepared. Hopefully, question two made winning less urgent!*

Jason sucked in his breath through his teeth. After reading the first two questions he had not expected to have to supply one of his own. His mind raced. Probably the best question he had come up with was an odd piece of trivia he had discussed one day with a kid named Steve Vaughn in his English class. The six letters in Steve’s last name had inspired the conversation.

“What is the longest one-syllable word you can think of?” Jason asked Copernum.

“Is that the entire question?” the regent confirmed.

“It is.”

A third hourglass was overturned.

“Point of clarification,” Copernum said, brow creased. “Are you asking me to name the monosyllabic word containing the most letters?”

“I’ll allow the inquiry,” the regent said.

“I am,” said Jason.

The chancellor stroked his chin, squinting up at the ceiling, as if lost in profound calculations. He folded and unfolded his arms. He rubbed his brow.

Jason crossed his toes for luck. It appeared the chancellor had never considered this question, which meant he had a chance. Ever since the conversation with Steve, Jason had noticed whenever he came across a long one-syllable word. The word he had in mind, if not the longest, was pretty close.

The chancellor stared darkly at the floor. Then he looked up, leering.

“I have your answer. How dare you pose such an absurd riddle? The longest monosyllabic word I can *think* of is *thoughts*. Eight letters.”

All eyes shifted to Jason. He straightened. “Apparently, Chancellor, one-syllable words are not one of your *strengths*. Nine letters.”

Copernum paled. He looked to the regent. “But . . . but he said the longest word I could think of. At the time the longest word I could think of was ‘thoughts.’ And the question functions like a riddle—one thinks thoughts.”

Dolan shook his head. “You clarified that he was asking for the monosyllabic word with the most letters. There can be no debate. Lord Jason of Caberton has supplied the superior answer. Effective immediately he is the new chancellor.”

The crowd roared. Jason smiled in shock, holding back tears of relief. Had he actually won? Was that possible?

The regent arose and retrieved the silver mantle from Copernum’s shoulders and a ring from his right hand. The room only half quieted for his remarks. “Thank you, honored Copernum, Marquess of Jansington. Our kingdom will always be grateful for your years of venerable service. You are hereby honorably relieved of the office of chancellor.” Copernum stood rigid with stunned disbelief. The throng applauded. There were a few catcalls.

“Ascend the royal dais, Lord Jason,” the regent invited. Jason complied.

The regent spoke in a loud voice as he draped the mantle around Jason’s shoulders and presented him with the ring. “Lord Jason of Caberton, you are hereby entrusted with the office of chancellor, making you guardian of the realm and chief advisor to the regent and acting sovereign, Dolan, Duke of Vernasett.”

The crowd cheered enthusiastically.

Copernum stepped forward to clasp Jason’s hand. “Congratulations, lordling,” the former chancellor breathed, smiling kindly. “You will be dead by sunrise.”

Before Jason could even react, the regent took Jason’s hand and raised it as high as he could. “I call for a feast to welcome our brash new chancellor, to be held at the end of the coming week in my banquet hall.” He turned to Jason, speaking for his ears only. “Well done, young man. You demonstrated great poise. We shall meet in private later this afternoon. I look forward to exchanging ideas with you.”

Jason turned and looked for Copernum. The marquess had already departed.

# CHANCELLOR

That evening Jason sat alone on a black horsehair love seat, elbows on his knees, chin propped on his hands. He got up and went out to the blue-tiled balcony. Through the dimming twilight he surveyed the city of Trensicourt spread out beneath him, then let his gaze drift to the shadowed farmland below the plateau. Half-seen forms of bats or small birds wheeled and darted in the air below, flickering into view most clearly as they streaked past illuminated windows.

Copernum had vacated his quarters hours after losing the contest, taking his staff and his personal items but leaving most of the furniture. The apartments of the chancellor occupied the upper three floors of one of the castle's largest towers. The belongings Jason had left in the Upturned Goblet had already been transported to his new bedroom atop the tower.

Jason leaned against the stone balustrade, shivering in response to the chill breeze. Two levels below, in the rooms that now served as his offices, a page, a maid, a cook, a scribe, and two guards all awaited his orders. A bodyguard was stationed outside his bedroom door. None of them had served Copernum, but Jason had no idea how loyal they would prove. They all had been assigned to him by some administrator working under orders from the regent.

Jason studied the diverse buildings, the watch fires along the city wall, and the cultivated land beyond the wall atop the plateau. How could he be second in command of this sprawling kingdom? A few weeks ago his biggest worries had been getting decent grades and perfecting his curveball. He never would have imagined himself achieving anything like this.

Abandoning the view, Jason trudged to his bed, a sumptuous monstrosity that could easily sleep six. A pile of embers cast a warm red glow from the fireplace. He ran both hands through his hair. He would die tonight, if Copernum kept his promise. The threat could have been an idle exaggeration meant only to agitate him, but Copernum had sounded eerily certain.

Despite the soaring altitude of his accommodations, despite strong walls and solid doors, despite the multiple guards keeping watch, Jason had never felt more vulnerable. Up until last night Copernum had lived in these quarters and slept in this room. He could provide assassins with keys and a thorough description of how best to gain access.

To imitate a slumbering form, Jason arranged pillows under the fancy coverlet fashioned from soft rabbit pelts. The deep mattress was generously stuffed with down. No bed had ever beckoned more deliciously, but he crouched down and slithered underneath, bringing a pillow and a pair of blankets. The bed stood high enough that he had several inches of extra space above him as he lay on his back, one blanket beneath him, the other covering him. A fabric skirt shielded the space beneath the bed from view.

Jason lay staring up at the underside of the bed, his poniard clutched in one hand. He had never felt so alone. He missed Rachel. Could she be irritating at times? Sure. But she was also smart, and fun, and he knew he could trust her. Seeing her in the throne room had reminded him how much he had grown to rely on her. She had become a real friend. He wished she could have remained with him today.

Earlier that day, after the contest, the regent and his retinue had departed, leaving Jason to be tersely congratulated by Bartley, who notably kept his distance thereafter. The gambling acquaintance in the fancy coat had escorted Jason around the throne room, introducing him to a series of individuals who congratulated him with varying degrees of warmth. From most he got the impression that they did not wish to be seen acting too welcoming. He met counts and countesses, lords and ladies, scholars, poets, musicians, and artists. Names and titles all jumbled together.

Later, during a brief meeting with the regent, Jason had related the threat made by Copernum. Dolan had told him to be careful, and had explained that such threats were a burden of all men who held high offices. Jason had also conveyed the threat to Norval, his bodyguard, a solid man with a thick mustache, who had promised to remain vigilant at his door all night.

Jason had watched for an opportunity to slip away from the castle, but he had been surrounded by attendants all day, faking his way through meetings until he was delivered to his quarters in the evening. While dwelling in a tall tower held certain protections, it felt as inescapable as a prison.

Under the bed Jason bit his lip softly. He had hoped for communication from Nicholas or Rachel, but none had arrived. So now he had to survive the night.



Alone. Hopefully, the dark hours would pass quietly. He promised himself he would find a way to escape his new job in the morning.

His thoughts turned to home. What were his parents doing right now? Had they figured out how to care for Shadow? He expected his dog missed him as much as anyone. What was Matt doing right now? Or Tim? Jason wondered if they had grown used to not having him around. He didn't feel like his whole self without them. He wished he could text them or call them up. What if he died tonight? How long would it take everyone to forget him?

The blankets began to feel very relaxing. It had been a long day, full of stress and confusion. He yawned, and shook his head to clear it. Soon he was slowly blinking; then he experimented with closing his eyes temporarily, just to rest them briefly. Sleep overtook him swiftly.

He awoke in the dark, certain he had heard a noise, feeling momentarily disoriented. His knife remained in his hand. He almost sat up before he remembered he was under the bed. Now that he was conscious and alert, Jason heard nothing. By the faintness of the glow against the material of the skirt he could tell that the embers had burned low. He waited, senses straining. All remained silent. Perhaps he had imagined the sound.

Breathing gently, he edged over until his face was beside the skirt at the foot of the bed. Feeling somewhat silly, he slid his knife from its sheath and with the tip of the blade raised the skirt just enough to peer out with one eye. By the feeble glow of the embers Jason saw the legs of a person stealthily advancing toward the bed. From the build it appeared to be a man. Jason's chest clenched in fear.

The furtive figure wore moccasins and made no sound as he moved. How had he gotten in? Jason considered calling for Norval. But this very well might be Norval! Or someone Norval had quietly admitted.

The intruder was about to pass out of view as he approached the side of the bed. Jason lowered the skirt and carefully scooted to the side the intruder was approaching, trying to breathe soundlessly. Again he raised the skirt with the blade. One of the intruder's feet was inches away. Jason thought of his uncle Kevin, who had hobbled around in casts and braces for months after snapping his Achilles tendon while playing tennis. Staring at the unprotected foot, Jason realized he could probably sever the Achilles tendon before the intruder knew what hit him. The moccasin did not rise above the ankle, and the pants were thin and close-fitting.

Jason heard the covers being thrown back, followed by a sharp intake of breath. The poor angle prevented him from putting all of his strength into the motion, but Jason slashed the back of the leg about an inch above the ankle. The blade of the poniard proved keen, slicing easily through the material of the pants and deeply into the flesh.

The figure sprang away using his good leg, then collapsed to the floor, clutching the injury, emitting an agonized growl.

“Help! Intruder!” Jason called, rolling out from under the bed on the side opposite the wounded assassin.

“Intruder!” Norval cried, relaying the alarm as he burst through the door, short sword in one hand, crossbow in the other.

Jason watched from his crouched position as a thrown knife buried itself in Norval’s abdomen. The bodyguard staggered to one side, firing an aimless quarrel into the floor. Jason rose, his thumb on the trigger that would launch the poniard blade, just in time to see the dark figure scramble into the fireplace, scattering embers as he passed. Jason lunged to the large fireplace. Peering inside, he discovered that the flue extended both upward and downward. For a moment he could faintly hear the assassin fleeing down the flue somewhere below.

Jason backed out of the fireplace as four guards rushed into the room, weapons ready, a couple bearing torches.

“He’s escaped through the fireplace, heading down!” Jason shouted. “I slashed open the back of his ankle.” Two of the guards left in pursuit. Two remained. One of the guards knelt beside Norval. The other held a torch and a sword. Jason approached the fallen bodyguard.

“The chancellor?” Norval coughed, voice tight, eyes squeezed shut, sweat shining on his face in the torchlight.

“Lord Jason is unharmed,” the kneeling guard assured him. “Let me see the wound.”

Norval clutched the haft of the knife in his gut with both hands. He shook his head. “End this,” he grunted through clenched teeth.

The guard pried Norval’s hands from the handle of the knife. The haft was black, the pommel shaped into the likeness of a grinning skull. “What the devil?” the guard murmured.

Thin tendrils of acrid smoke curled up from the wound. Norval began to convulse. His wide eyes rolled back, and perspiration drenched his reddening face. His lips twitched as if trying to speak.

“The knife was poisoned,” Jason said.

“Bloodbane,” the kneeling guard agreed. “A foul toxin, excruciating and without antidote.”

The convulsions were increasing in violence. Norval held out a hand, the veins standing out so sharply on his sweat-glossed forearm they appeared on the verge of bursting through the skin. With a strangled cry he slumped into unconsciousness. His breathing continued in irregular gasps.

“This way, Lord Jason,” said the guard with the torch, leading him out of the bedroom.

Jason looked back as he exited to the elegantly furnished antechamber. The other guard covered Norval with his cloak. The bodyguard’s limbs continued to spasm in fluttering bursts.

Although Norval passed out of sight, Jason remained aware that the venomous knife had been intended for him. He could have been the one flailing on the ground, blood boiling in reaction to a vile poison, had he slept in his bed, or had Norval failed to respond so promptly to his cry for aid. Tears of gratitude to the dying bodyguard stung his eyes.

Several guards came into the antechamber. Most proceeded into the bedchamber. Others poked about the anteroom, as if they suspected the assassin might be hidden behind a wall hanging or in a drawer. A few gathered in hushed conversation.

Jason stood apart, deeply shaken, trying to process what had happened. Somebody had tried to assassinate him! It was one thing to know about a threat and quite another to see it carried out. If he had died, his loved ones would never have known what had happened to him. He would have forever been an unsolved missing-person case.

A broad guard with a fringe of graying hair around his bald scalp entered the antechamber and approached Jason. The other guards rose to attention, but he waved them back to their former activities. The older guard wore a pair of golden braids on his left shoulder that seemed to denote a high rank. “Lord Chancellor,” the guard began, “I am Cedric, captain of the King’s Guard. His Highness Duke Dolan requests that I escort you to his presence.”

“Of course.” Glad he had slept in his clothes, Jason followed Cedric out of his apartments and down several corridors. They entered a room where a pair of guards slid aside a plush sofa and rolled up an embroidered purple carpet to reveal a trapdoor in the floor. The guards raised the trapdoor, and Jason followed Cedric down a curving stairwell. A guard followed, bearing a lantern.

At the start of a narrow passageway beyond the stairs Dolan awaited, flanked by four guards, all wearing broadswords.

“Welcome, Chancellor Jason,” Dolan said. “We lament word of the attempt on your life. Let us enter the lorevault to discuss these matters in greatest privacy.”

“Lead on, Your Highness,” Jason said.

They walked along a winding passageway until arriving at a round, iron door. The door had a grid of holes and seven pegs. The guards turned away from the door while the regent inserted the pegs. Jason moved to turn away, but Dolan insisted he watch. “You are the only person besides myself trusted with the combination,” the regent said.

With the seventh peg came the tumbling of the locking mechanism. The regent removed the pegs, and two guards seized the great door. Heaving together, they swung it open.

Jason and the regent entered, bringing a lantern, and the guards closed the door behind them. The room was a spacious cube. The wall to the left of the door held books from floor to ceiling. The wall to the right supported stacks of rolled scrolls. The far shelves contained artifacts varying from fist-sized jewels to crystal vials to assorted weaponry. Above the far shelves were a few ventilation slats. A small table and two chairs occupied the center of the room.

Alone with the regent, Jason felt self-conscious. He resolved to try to sound as adult as possible. Glancing up, he noted the eight words emblazoned over the door. As Copernum had stated, the fourth from the left was “Fex.” Jason felt relieved to have the matter confirmed. He officially had half of the Word.

## A FEX EN

“Your second question in the contest was unusual,” Dolan said, apparently noticing Jason’s interest in the inscription above the door. “How did you know about the inscription?”

“My father mentioned it once. I think he heard of it from Galloran.”

“Were you simply trying to unnerve Copernum? He seemed perplexed by the inquiry.”

“I only had one good question,” Jason said. “My first two questions were to make him underestimate me.”

Dolan considered Jason suspiciously. “I sense that you are full of secrets. Perhaps one day soon you will share them with me. Take a seat.” In private

Dolan seemed more direct and intense than the grandfatherly persona he portrayed on his throne.

They sat facing each other. Jason noticed that the table was a map. He saw the peninsula that projected westward into the ocean. Some distance inland Trensicourt was marked with a spot, as was Whitelake, a speck northward beside a small body of water.

“You like the map?”

Jason nodded. “Very much.”

“Copernum insisted on it. After all, what use is a private chamber without a few secrets inside? Maldor would frown upon this map. He understands the advantage inherent in monopolizing such information.”

Jason continued studying the map. The little fishing town at the oval inlet was called Flet. The town where he, Rachel, and Ferrin had been imprisoned must have been Carning. The place where Galloran lived as the Blind King was marked Fortaim, and the river to the north was the Telkron. The Repository of Learning was unmarked.

Many other names marked the map. Jason noticed Harthenham, a good distance north and east of Whitelake, beyond an empty green place marked the Sunken Lands.

“You did well surviving the attack,” Dolan commended.

“Copernum told me I would not live to see the sunrise. I was trying to be careful. Norval, my bodyguard, will die in my place. How do we retaliate?”

“You believe Copernum masterminded the assault?”

“Considering his threat, I’m pretty sure.”

Dolan sighed. “There could be many viable suspects. A newcomer to court earning the chancellorship at such a tender age could spawn any number of enemies. Harsh words spoken in a moment of embarrassment would not serve as sufficient evidence to accuse Copernum. The knife bore the black skull. Only the minions of Maldor use that ornament. The only material evidence we possess suggests an imperial assassin.”

“Then Copernum must have planted it,” Jason insisted. “Or maybe he called in a favor.”

The regent frowned. “Copernum has strong ties to Felrook, but he is much too powerful to implicate without absolute proof. Did he orchestrate the crime? Probably. Using emblems of the emperor to attack you was his way of reminding everyone who backs him. The assassin somehow eluded our pursuit. All guards

remain on alert, but considering the assassin has evaded us this long, I have little hope we will apprehend him.”

“So I just wait until he tries again?” Jason could hardly believe the regent was so unruffled by the incident.

“Copernum might not strike again soon. He sent his message. He may now content himself with unseating you through a formal challenge.”

“Instead of an informal murder.”

“You have the idea.”

Jason folded his hands on the table. “So there is nothing we can do to retaliate?”

Dolan cocked his head to one side. “There is little *I* can do. Surely you are not so naive to the art of statecraft as you pretend. There is much *you* could do. But weigh your options carefully. Most men in this kingdom would endure anything to avoid an outright feud with Copernum.”

*Including you*, Jason added silently. At first glance this ruler had looked much more authentic than Galloran. But on closer inspection he possessed neither the backbone nor the personal presence of the Blind King.

“If Maldor were behind the attack, would we do anything?”

Dolan made an indifferent gesture. “There is no definite evidence to implicate Maldor. As you suggested, the knife could have been a ruse.”

“And if we had definite evidence?”

Dolan stirred in his seat. “Take care what you imply. I lost one of my finest bodyguards protecting you.”

“Wouldn’t you want revenge? Wouldn’t you want justice?”

The regent ground his teeth. “Be reasonable. The semblance of freedom we maintain depends on keeping Maldor appeased. To a degree that includes keeping Copernum content. Should he openly align himself with the emperor against us, all could be lost. I like you, Jason. I admire the composure you showed facing Copernum. It was a daring stunt. Nevertheless you are an upstart about whom I know very little. In perilous times one must overlook greater injustices than a botched assassination in order to preserve peace. This kingdom cannot afford idealism. If you hope to endure, you must learn the art of compromise.”

“I’m your main advisor,” Jason said, flabbergasted. “An attack against me is an attack against you and your entire kingdom. What if I had been killed? Would my murderer simply have returned to his former position?”

“A wise man would know not to ask such questions.”

Leaning his elbows on the table, Jason rubbed his eyes. How could Dolan pretend cowardice was compromise? Did he believe his words? What hope was there for a kingdom whose leader was afraid to seek justice?

“Do not despair,” Dolan said. “I called you to the lorevault because you have another option for survival. An attractive one, by the look of it.”

Jason raised his head.

The regent withdrew an envelope from a pocket inside his robe. An elaborate seal held it closed.

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“It arrived for you tonight after the attempted assassination.”

Dolan handed the envelope across the table. Jason opened it, removing a cream-colored card inscribed with silver lettering.

MY ESTEEMED LORD JASON,

YOUR PRESENCE IS HUMBLY REQUESTED AT THE ETERNAL FEAST AT YOUR SOONEST CONVENIENCE. A GLORIOUS BANQUET WILL BE HELD IN YOUR HONOR UPON THE DAY OF YOUR ARRIVAL. BE ASSURED THAT HARTHENHAM CASTLE PERMANENTLY STANDS UPON NEUTRAL TERRITORY AS FAR AS ALL POLITICAL MATTERS ARE CONCERNED. MANY DWELL HERE HAPPILY WHO, LIKE YOU, OPENLY OPPOSED OUR IMPERIAL LEADERSHIP IN TIMES PAST. ALLOW ME TO PERSONALLY ENCOURAGE YOU TO SEIZE THIS RARE OPPORTUNITY TO REST FROM YOUR STRUGGLES FOR A TIME AS MY HONORED GUEST. MAY MY HOME EVER BE YOUR HAVEN

YOUR SINCERE ADMIRER,

*Duke Conrad of Harthenham*

The signature at the bottom carried a bit more flourish than the rest of the words. Jason reread the message.

Licking his lips, Dolan extended a hand. “May I see it?” Jason gave him the card. The regent studied the message, shaking his head. “I have never beheld an actual invitation to the Eternal Feast.”

“I’ve heard of the Eternal Feast.”

The regent shot him a sharp glance. “Who hasn’t? It is merely paradise visiting the mortal world. A fortress against all concerns. A sanctuary of endless delights. Those invited are pardoned of all crimes, and they live out their days in careless luxury.”

“Sounds like being a king.”

“In many ways superior to kingship. A king has duties. Enemies. Fears.” Dolan spoke like a man beholding a vision. “Those who dine at the Eternal Feast know hardship only as a memory.”

“Have you gone there?” Jason asked.

“I would not be here if I had. None return.”

“Foul play?”

“Quite the contrary. None who are invited ever choose to leave. Who would surrender paradise?”

“Have you been invited?”

“Alas, no,” Dolan sighed. “The emperor needs me here.”

“The invitation is from Maldor?”

“Indirectly. The emperor sponsors the feast. Conrad hosts it. You are most fortunate, Jason. You need not fear Copernum or any man ever again.”

Jason held out a hand, and the regent returned the card. “So the feast is a prison.”

Dolan chuckled. “In a sense, perhaps. A voluntary prison where none complain. Would that I could live out my days in similar incarceration.”

Jason nodded. The ploy was obvious. The feast was a permanent bribe allowing Maldor to get rid of enemies. Still, the prospect of being out of danger was attractive. If he was stuck in some other reality, why not ditch his concerns and live a life of luxury? Nicholas had recommended that this should be his real goal. But if he caved and went to the feast, how would he ever get home? And what would happen to Rachel?

Glancing at the syllable over the door, Jason sighed. Maldor was evil. The men who worked for him were evil. The Eternal Feast might simply be another trap. How could anyone know how great it was if nobody ever returned? Besides, the fact that the invitation had been issued meant that Maldor was getting worried. He should be! Jason already had half of the Word that could destroy him.

Jason stared down at the map. He could not abandon the quest. He had another good lead, and Whitelake was not too far off. He could not abandon Rachel. He could not give up on getting home. He could not betray the trust Galloran had placed in him. Ferrin was waiting. Jason placed the card back into the envelope. He would hang on to the invitation. If he was ever cornered, perhaps he could save himself by accepting it.

“This is an amazing offer,” Jason said. “Can I take a day to consider it? I need some time to think it over.”



“Certainly. Jason, there is no shame in accepting this invitation. Should you abdicate, Copernum will be reinstated, and the kingdom will prosper. Be twice warned: Openly crossing Copernum, whether or not you feel certain he was behind the attempted assassination, will likely bring ruination. Let it go. In your position I would relinquish the chancellorship and join the feast. Any sane man would do likewise. You will be remembered as a daring lord and chancellor emeritus as you live out your days in blissful opulence.”

Jason nodded. “I hear you. Is that all for now?”

The regent passed Jason a slip of parchment with seven pairs of symbols. “This is yours.”

“The combination to the lorevault,” Jason said.

“You are free to study here at will. The combination is not the same as it was yesterday. Should you resign, the combination will change again.”

“I may need a coach,” Jason said. “A way to travel.”

“I take your meaning,” the regent said, relief in his tone. “I can have a coach made ready within the hour, along with a tight-lipped driver. Should you elect to depart, no man would blame you.”

*Some would*, Jason added silently. *Just not the sort you work with.* “Thank you, Your Highness.”

\* \* \*

Less than two hours later, with the sun rising, Jason stretched out in the compartment of a fine coach, the outside lacquered a shiny black and decorated with silver filigree, pulled by six powerful horses. He wore traveling clothes. On the cushioned seat beside him were provisions prepared by his cook, and some of the courtly attire he had worn as Lord Jason. His rings and mantle were stashed away, the rings in his cloak, the mantle rolled up with the rest of his gaudy apparel.

Jason moved the curtain to peer out as the coach descended the steep ramp down the plateau, then leaned back and closed his eyes. He could hardly believe he was leaving the stress and intrigues of Trensicourt behind. He hoped Rachel would have the sense to make her way to the Stumbling Stag. He didn’t know how to contact her.

Once the coach leveled out, Jason became more comfortable and tried to doze. The jostling of the coach prevented him at first, but eventually fatigue won the contest.

When the coachman, a diminutive, knobby fellow, shook him awake, they were stopped outside a tavern. Jason rubbed his eyes. The sign over the door showed a deer with forked antlers.

Jason instructed the coachman to wait for him, and climbed out of the compartment onto the packed dirt of the street. Ferrin leaned in the doorway. "Come inside, Lord Jason," the displacer said with a sweeping bow.

"Don't say my name so loudly," Jason muttered in a low voice as he drew near. "We don't want to stand out."

"Oh," Ferrin replied in an equally cautious tone. "Then you might want to rethink the elaborate carriage bearing the royal crest. Would you prefer I address you as chancellor?"

They went inside together.

"You know I became chancellor?"

"News of that sort travels on wings."

"Do you know Copernum tried to kill me?" Jason asked.

"No. You're ahead of that news. I wish I could pretend to be surprised. Now the same man has tried to kill each of us and failed. I guess that seals our friendship."

"Copernum ordered your execution?"

"Who else? I stole his cousin's fiancée, then killed his cousin in a duel. To clarify, the cousin insisted on the duel, and I fought fair. You hungry?"

Jason nodded. "What happened to the girl?"

"She found out I was a displacer." Ferrin flagged down a barmaid and ordered food.

Jason got out two gold pellets and two silver. "Here is your money back. With interest."

"Keep the excess," Ferrin said. "You weren't an investment."

"I can spare it," Jason said. "I grabbed a lot of money. Well, technically, an attendant grabbed it for me. Amazing the funds you can access as chancellor!"

Ferrin accepted the pellets. "I'll hold these until you need them."

"Any word from Rachel?"

"I was about to ask you the same question."

"We didn't stay together. I had no way to contact her. I hope she comes here."

"She'll come when she hears you fled." Ferrin tapped his knuckles against the tabletop. "Hopefully, she's already on her way. It would be hard to outpace a coach and six."

“You still want to join us?” Jason asked.

“Are you truly abandoning the chancellorship?”

“One assassination attempt was enough.”

Ferrin raised his eyebrows and smiled. “The regent will be furious. Don’t ever go back.”

“I wouldn’t enjoy working for Dolan. He seems like a coward.”

Ferrin glanced hastily around. “Chancellor or not, lower your voice to express such things. We’re still well inside the domain pertaining to Trensicourt. Some men would duel you over an insult to their ruler. Not that I’m disagreeing. Copernum ran that circus, and will again soon enough, I expect.”

“So do you still want to come with us? I’m becoming a bigger target every day.”

“Why do you think I was waiting here?”

“We’re going to Whitelake,” Jason said. “Do you know how to get there?”

“Whitelake? That’s a little remote, isn’t it? Not much of a town.”

“We need to go to the actual lake, not just the town.”

“Are we sightseeing? I’ve never gazed upon the actual Whitelake. It involves a climb. But if that’s where you want to go, I’m willing.”

“I have the coach,” Jason said. “That should save us some time. I guess we just wait for Rachel?”

“Is the little driver the only man accompanying you?”

“Yes.”

Ferrin stretched his arms. “In a coach like that, Whitelake is only a day or two away. The horses look amazing.”

“The driver will take us far,” Jason said. “I actually left with permission from Dolan.”

“What? How?”

“I got invited to the Eternal Feast.”

Ferrin blinked and shook his head. “Excuse me?”

“Dolan pushed me to accept. I basically told him I would, and he provided the coach.”

“But you’re declining the invitation?”

“No.”

“Are you daft? Why not? Wait, why would you get the invitation in the first place? What have you been doing?”

Jason shrugged. "I guess because I became chancellor and survived the assassination attempt."

"That makes sense. Dolan has strong ties to Felrook, as does his former chancellor. They must have wanted you out of the picture in order to reinstate Copernum. But why not accept? Do you know how easy your life would be?"

"It might not be as great as everybody imagines," Jason said. "Nobody who goes there returns. The food might be good, but to me it sounds like a prison."

"Maybe," Ferrin mused. "Still, as prisons go, Harthenham would be my pick ten times out of ten. You're an interesting person, Jason. There is more to you than a glance would reveal. Who knows how long we'll be waiting for Rachel? Could be hours, might be days. You should instruct your driver to see to the horses and get himself some food."

"Good idea," Jason said.

"I'll wait here."

On his way out the door Jason noticed a pair of riders loping up the street. One was Rachel.

"Jason!" she called as they made eye contact.

Jason waved, relief flooding through him. As she approached, he realized how worried he'd been that she might have been hurt.

The riders pulled up near him, and Rachel dismounted. She wore new traveling clothes that actually fit her.

"Is this your destination?" the man asked, a rugged character with a crooked nose.

"Yes, thank you, Bruce."

"Very well. Safe journey."

Taking the reins of her horse, he rode away.

"Who was that guy?" Jason asked quietly.

"My escort," Rachel whispered back. "Nicholas took care of it. He's been much more helpful than he acted when we first met him."

"Once we left his shop, I thought we'd never hear from him again."

"Apparently Copernum linked him to us. And Copernum suspects we're Beyonders. Nicholas decided that the best way to strengthen his position was for us to succeed and escape. We met in person two more times, and he sent several notes. He was thrilled that you defeated Copernum and pleased that you survived the assassination."

"It was so freaky," Jason said. "You wouldn't believe it. I slept under my bed, and this guy came in and tried to stab me with a poisoned knife, but got my

bodyguard instead.”

“You’re okay?” Rachel asked.

“I’m fine. I’m glad you got away safely. I was worried.”

Rachel blushed slightly. “You got the syllable? I didn’t wait around to hear.”

“The third is ‘fex.’ I saw it inside the lorevault as well.”

“Good question?”

“Great question.”

“Is Ferrin here?”

“He’s waiting inside.”

Jason told the coachman that they would have a meal and then proceed to Whitelake, inviting the driver to get food and make whatever preparations he deemed necessary for the horses. Then Jason and Rachel entered the Stumbling Stag. They reached Ferrin’s table at the same time as the barmaid.

“Perfect timing,” Ferrin said. “Rachel can have my food.” He ordered another meal.

“I won’t take your food,” Rachel said once the barmaid left.

“If you ignore the meal, it will get cold and stale. Eat,” Ferrin insisted. “While you’ve been busy, I’ve been resting. So tell me, Rachel, have you married a prince and become the future queen of Kadara?”

“My time in Trensicourt wasn’t quite as interesting as Jason’s,” she said. “But it was stressful enough that I’m relieved to get away.”

“Leave city life to the masochists,” Ferrin said, waving a dismissive hand. “It’s the open road for us!”

# WHITELAKE

On their second afternoon after leaving the Stumbling Stag, Rachel stared out the coach window, trying to ignore the headache all the jerking and jouncing had created. They had reached rocky country with tall trees, steep hills, and rushing streams, and had not passed through a town all day.

She glanced over at Jason, who was trying ineffectively to nap. If *he* couldn't sleep, she knew it was a rough ride. What a funny guy. At first he hadn't struck her as the sharpest knife in the drawer, but she was starting to realize she could have gotten trapped in a parallel world with somebody much worse. She could hardly believe he had managed to become chancellor. Had he asked her the same question, she might have topped him. "Squirreled" had ten letters, although some people argued it wasn't a single syllable.

Her gaze shifted to Ferrin. The displacer had been their best find so far. He was the perfect guide—knowledgeable, skillful, and well traveled. Plus he was funny and not bad-looking. He acted so grateful for their friendship it made her furious at the rest of Lyrian for discriminating against his kind.

He noticed her looking at him. "The farther we get from Trensicourt, the less we want this coach," he said, speaking loud enough to be heard over the clatter of their motion.

"We should start walking before my teeth rattle out of my head," Jason replied.

"I warned you we're heading into remote country," Ferrin reminded him. "The roads will only get worse, and the inhabitants less lawful. We've passed beyond the orderly kingdom of Trensicourt. This is a wild territory. Without an armed escort our coach will inevitably draw bandits. Out here a smart man wears a hard face and conceals his wealth."

"Sounds delightful," Rachel said.

"I'd prefer to avoid the town of Whitelake," Ferrin said. "It is no place for a pretty girl. The communities out in the wildlands are full of trappers, hunters,

traders, and miners. Not to mention gamblers and outlaws. Many of them will take advantage of a stranger, given the opportunity.”

“When do we ditch the coach?” Jason asked.

Pulling aside the curtains, Ferrin leaned out the window. “Before long we’ll reach a trail that will lead us to the lake. It won’t accommodate the coach, but the walk should require less than a day.”

“How steep is the climb?” Jason asked.

“Nothing perilous,” Ferrin assured him. “People stay away from Whitelake because it’s cursed, not because of the ascent.”

“Cursed?” Rachel asked.

“Supposedly the lake is bewitched,” Ferrin said. “Even the hardy folk of the wildlands keep their distance, which should prevent us from meeting much interference.”

“We need to get to the island in the middle of the lake,” Jason said.

“The island?” Ferrin exclaimed. “Why? Are you on a tour of the most dangerous and inaccessible places in all the land?”

“What makes you say that?” Rachel asked.

“Nothing floats on Whitelake. Not boats, not insects, not dust. Certainly not people. Everything sinks. Nobody knows how deep it is. Folks in town claim it goes down to the center of the world.”

“But you’ve never actually seen the lake?” Jason checked.

“No,” Ferrin responded. “You think people might be exaggerating?”

“Only one way to find out,” Jason said.

Ferrin kept peering out the window. Half an hour later, pulling up the hood of his cloak, he called for the driver to halt. After they climbed down and collected their gear, Jason told the driver to return to Trensicourt.

“Are you certain, my lord?” the driver asked, eyes darting to Ferrin’s hooded form. “Begging your pardon, this is far from the destination I anticipated, an uncivilized stretch of wilderness where you might come to harm.”

Rachel had not heard the driver utter a complaint as Jason had issued prior instructions. Evidently, the man had reached his limit.

“I’m sure, Evan,” Jason said. “I need to take a few detours before I go where Duke Dolan probably told you I was heading.”

With practiced skill Evan produced a crossbow and pointed it at Ferrin. “If this man is trying to coerce you, I can take care of him, my lord.”

“No, Evan, he’s a friend,” Jason assured the coachman. “Thanks for your concern, but I’m really here on purpose. You can tell the regent that I’m just

taking care of some unfinished business.”

Evan lowered the weapon. “Very well. Safe journey, my lord.”

“You too, Evan,” Jason said.

The driver flicked the reins, and the coach rumbled forward.

“How is he going to turn the coach around?” Rachel asked. The road looked much too narrow.

“He’ll forge ahead until he finds a clearing,” Ferrin said. “Come, we should get away from the road before nightfall.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, from a craggy hilltop, Ferrin pointed out the town of Whitelake, a rough-hewn settlement of log structures a few miles from the base of a squat, conical mountain. Golden-brown prairie land surrounded the town, beyond which forested hills and ridges continued into the distance.

“Where is the lake?” Jason asked.

“Atop the mount,” Ferrin said.

“It looks like a squashed volcano,” Jason said.

Ferrin rubbed his chin. “Volcanic activity might help explain tales of an unnatural lake.”

They descended the hill and started across the open, grassy plain separating them from the mount. Rachel noticed that Ferrin kept checking behind them.

“Think we’re being followed?” Rachel asked.

“Almost certainly,” Ferrin said. “It’s a single person, staying well back, I’ve half glimpsed him a few times. He might just be a hunter watching to ensure we leave his territory alone. Maybe he’ll veer off now that we’ve left the forest.”

“And if not?” Jason asked.

Ferrin shrugged. “Could be a scout for a team of bandits. Could be a tenacious spy from Trensicourt. Could be an agent of the emperor. Hard to guess.”

“Let’s hope he’s a shy, lonely fisherman,” Jason said.

“The mountain doesn’t look too hard to climb,” Rachel noted, looking ahead.

“True,” Ferrin agreed. “The slope all around the mountain is strangely regular—fairly steep but never sheer. Anyone behind us will have a nice view of our ascent. But nobody will be able to sneak up on us.”

They crossed the grassland without incident and started up the mountain. The slope was steep enough that hiking up it felt like climbing stairs. Rachel



bent forward like Jason, using her hands as she advanced. Partway up they took a lunch break, having already gained an impressive view of the plains and forest behind them. As they finished, Ferrin announced that they seemed to have lost their tracker.

When they finally arrived at the top of the slope, Rachel's legs ached, and her back felt sore from crouching forward. Perspiration dampened her face. But her discomfort was forgotten at the sight of the odd lake.

The top of the broad mount looked like the round caldera of a volcano, filled almost to the rim with sludgy white fluid. A small island, little more than a rock pile, poked up near the center. The surface of Whitelake was unnaturally smooth. Heat radiated from the lake, making the air shimmer. A smell like overboiled eggs permeated the air.

"Come," Ferrin said, proceeding to the edge of the lake. Jason and Rachel joined him.

Ferrin held up a small, flat piece of wood, displaying it as a magician might before performing a trick. He handed it to Jason. "Light, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Would normally float on water?"

"I guess so."

"Let's see what happens here." Ferrin handed the wood to Rachel.

She crouched, mindful of the heat radiating from the lake, and gently placed the piece of wood lengthwise on the creamy surface. The wooden fragment sank with hardly a ripple.

"What is the lake made of?" Jason asked.

"Not water," Ferrin replied.

"Looks like pancake batter," Rachel said. "Has anyone ever reached the island?"

"I have no idea," Ferrin said. "People say Whitelake is cursed. If nobody comes here, and nothing floats on the lake, I can't imagine anyone has been to that island. Nor can I imagine why you two would want to go there. I'd hate to watch you drown."

Jason glanced at Rachel. "Could we have gotten bad info?"

"Info?" Ferrin echoed. "Did somebody tell you to come here? Who? Why?"

Jason crouched, selected a flat rock, and winged it sidearm out onto the lake. It took a huge skip, then another, and several smaller bounces, until it had traveled a very impressive distance. When it lost momentum, the rock finally sank. "Did you see that?" he asked. "The rock skipped like ten times!"

“Yes,” Ferrin answered in an intrigued tone.

Jason threw another with similar results. Rachel grabbed a stone, this one less flat, and threw it almost straight down at the water. It rebounded quite high, as if the surface were solid, then took a smaller hop and sank.

“Weird,” Rachel murmured, taking a stone in her hand and kneeling beside the lake. Holding the stone firmly, she struck the white fluid sharply. The surface felt solid. She pounded it several more times. Nothing splashed. The surface barely rippled. She examined the stone, observing no fluid on it anywhere. Dropping the stone softly into the lake, it sank.

“The surface hardens against pressure,” Jason observed. “Let’s try a big rock.” Together he and Rachel heaved a heavy stone against the surface of the lake. Sure enough, it rebounded once before losing momentum and sinking.

Rachel edged forward to the brink of the lake and stomped the surface with her foot. “Feels solid. Only yields a little, like a trampoline strung much too tight.”

She dipped her foot in slowly. The syrupy lake folded around the bottom of her boot.

“No!” Ferrin exclaimed, springing forward.

Once part of her boot sank beneath the surface, an alarming suction pulled it farther. Jerking back sharply, she felt the fluid harden around the submerged portion of her boot, as if it were encased in cement. When she relaxed, the fluid sucked it deeper. Rachel yanked again, hoping her foot would come free of the boot, which was already half immersed, but it was laced too securely.

Ferrin and Jason reached her side, supporting her. “Pull steadily against the lake, but not too hard,” Ferrin advised.

Rachel nodded. When she pulled too hard, the fluid solidified. Her only hope was to do this gradually. Braced by Ferrin and Jason, she resisted the suction just enough to prevent her boot from sinking deeper. Then, pulling only a little harder, she managed to slowly and evenly withdraw her boot from the liquid.

Once her boot was free, Rachel staggered away from the lake. She plopped down, panting. Her boot looked like it had been painted white almost to the ankle. While she watched, the fluid slid unnaturally off the boot and pooled in a little depression in the ground, leaving no indication her boot had ever been white.

“Thanks for the help,” Rachel said. “If I had been alone, that would have been the end of me. I didn’t expect so much suction!”

“The wood you placed earlier sank strangely,” Ferrin said. “The lake seemed to draw it in.”

“Can you imagine drowning in there?” Jason said. “You would be sinking, but as you struggled to swim, the lake would harden around you. Then when you relaxed it would suck you deeper. The perfect quicksand.”

“It felt very warm, even through the boot,” Rachel said.

Ferrin gave a nod. “Warm enough to burn bare skin, I expect. Do you still intend to try for the island?”

Rachel gazed out across the lake to the pile of rocks at the center. The image wavered with the rising heat. “How far away do you think it is?”

Ferrin squinted. “Hard to say. There is nothing near the island to lend perspective. The heat rising off the lake could also distort our perception. The island may be farther than it appears.”

“Let me check if the lake will hold my weight,” Jason said. “You know, just run out a short way and back.”

“Allow me,” Ferrin volunteered. “If a foot gets stuck, I can let it go.”

“Right,” Rachel said, “but how far will you get in the wilderness without a foot?”

“We won’t sink unless we hold still,” Jason insisted. “Watch.”

He jogged out onto the lake, stamping his feet. The surface shivered slightly at the point of impact, but he did not sink. Jason turned and jogged back.

“Well done, chancellor,” Ferrin said.

“That lake reeks,” Jason complained. “Out on the surface you feel the heat more. Running to the island will be a nightmare.”

“But running there is our only option,” Rachel said.

“Unless we decide to hunt for entertainment elsewhere,” Ferrin mumbled.

“We have to do this,” Jason said with determination. “Well, I have to do it. No need for more than one of us to take the risk.”

“No, it’s my turn,” Rachel said. “I’m a runner. I’ll have a better chance. You jumped off the cliff, remember? Next cliff was mine.”

“You two know something that you’re not sharing,” Ferrin probed. “You have an idea what might be out there.”

“We can’t tell you,” Jason said. “Not knowing protects you. It has to do with why the emperor is after us, and why I had to become chancellor.”

“It isn’t fair that we keep you with us,” Rachel said. “We’re putting you in danger, Ferrin. If we explained, it would only make everything worse.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Ferrin said. “I see more than I reveal, and I don’t mean to pry. I just want the two of you to be sure whatever is out there is worth risking your lives.”

“It is,” Rachel said. “We have a lot riding on this. Jason, let me run to the island. I’m smaller, built for distance. I can make it.”

Jason puffed up his cheeks and exhaled. He held up a finger. “If you slip, I’ll never forgive you, or myself.”

“I never trip,” Rachel assured him. She studied the lake. She could easily maintain a brisk jog for three or four miles, but there would be unusual variables working against her. She had heavy boots, not running shoes. The heat from the lake might cause her to tire faster, and it might get hotter away from the shore. Plus, she would need to stamp down harder than she would with her regular stride, as insurance against her foot sinking through the surface. If that happened away from the shore, even just a little, she would be finished.

Despite the danger, she had to try. It was unfair to let Jason take all of the risks, especially when she legitimately had more chance for success than him.

“Wait a minute,” Jason said, going through his satchel. “The loremaster gave me berries that boost your energy. This might be the perfect time for some extra endurance!”

Taking a bag from the satchel, he poured a small handful of shriveled berries into his palm. He lifted one darkly mottled berry to his nostrils and immediately gagged.

“They’ve gone bad,” Ferrin said. “Eating them will do more harm than good.”

“Perfect,” Jason muttered, chucking the rotten berries into the lake.

“No worries,” Rachel said, rubbing her legs anxiously. “I’ve got this. Just give me a few minutes to relax and stretch out.”

She found a large, flat rock and spent a few minutes on her back, focusing on her breathing. Then she arose, rolled up her sleeves, and stripped off her unessential gear. She thought about running barefoot or in socks, but decided the extra weight of the boots would be justified by the protection they would give her feet against the heat of the lake.

She grabbed her ankle and pulled her leg back to stretch her quadriceps, holding the pose for fifteen seconds. Then the other leg. Keeping her legs straight, she leaned forward, touching the ground between her toes.

Rachel glanced at Jason. “Keep an eye on me. You don’t want to sit around wasting your time if I fall.”

“If you’re going to fall, don’t go,” Jason said.

“I feel good,” Rachel said, trying to convince herself as much as Jason. “I’ve got this.” She walked closer to the edge of the lake.

“Step hard and quick,” Jason urged. “It’s going to be hot and stinky. If it becomes too much to handle, double back.”

“Unless you’re more than halfway there,” Ferrin added.

“Okay,” Rachel said. “Here I go.”

Standing three paces from the edge of the lake, Rachel started trotting forward. She tried to ignore the reality that she was jogging onto the surface of a lake that minutes before had been sucking her under. It seemed suicidal.

Her first quick step onto Whitelake held her weight easily. After the first few strides she began to trust the surface and fell into a rhythm. The lake had enough give that it returned some of the energy she expended with her stomping strides. As long as she kept stepping firmly, she should be fine. Because she exerted extra force downward, she did not advance as quickly as when she normally jogged, but she found a good pace, and there was no hint of the liquid tugging at her boots.

She resisted the urge to look back, concentrating all of her energy on getting to the island and maintaining her shin-punishing stride. As she had feared, the farther she proceeded onto the lake, the higher the temperature became. In a short time the air she breathed went from uncomfortably warm to truly hot, and the stench intensified. The rapid increase in temperature alarmed her. How much hotter would it get? The white liquid did not bubble or boil or even stir. No steam arose. The only visual indicator of the heat was the rippling shimmer of objects far ahead, the trembling image of the island, wavering like a mirage.

Rachel’s breathing grew deeper and more ragged much sooner than she had expected. She tilted slightly forward, trying to squeeze more forward motion from each stamping stride. Frustratingly, the island did not appear much closer. She wiped sweat from her brow with her bare forearm, which itself was damp with perspiration.

She fixated on the surface of the lake directly in front of her, ignoring the island. Her deep breathing coated her throat and lungs with the hot sulfuric smell that saturated the air. She could taste the odor. She tried to ignore the sensation, because it made her want to retch.

Soon her shirt was drenched with sweat. The temperature intensified to sweltering. It felt like jogging in a sauna. Scalding air tore at her lungs.

Rachel finally looked up. She was notably nearer to her destination, but not close enough. The temperature became hellish. Her exertion coupled with the

heat radiating from the lake was overwhelming. Her head began to throb. A painful stitch burned in her side. The overtaxed muscles in her legs began to feel rubbery.

She broke stride and tried hopping in place. It required somewhat less exertion than jogging, and used different muscles. She struggled to choke down the bile in her throat, to ignore the suffocating heat searing her lungs. The island remained several hundred yards away.

The surface of the lake began to feel tacky. With each successive jump she felt increasing stickiness against the soles of her boots. Rachel realized she was getting lazy with her hopping. She was not thrusting her feet down briskly enough, nor lifting them quickly enough. If the sensation progressed beyond stickiness, a boot would get trapped, and she would die.

The thought impelled her forward. No use hopping when she could be making progress, especially once it proved to be less restful than she had hoped. Salty sweat stung her eyes. She wiped them clear. The nausea had diminished while she was hopping, but it returned as she jogged.

She took a bad step, almost stumbled, and for a moment the surface felt alarmingly wet. After recovering, she dashed forward faster than ever, eyes on the island. She was getting close.

The coppery taste of blood became more evident in her throat as her breathing became increasingly arduous. She was running inside an oven. Was the air shimmering more here, or was her vision blurring? She felt dizzy. The island was less than a hundred yards away. It looked bigger than it had from the shore. Not a rock pile. A boulder pile.

*Anyone can run a hundred yards*, she thought blearily. Each breath scorched her tortured lungs. The burning muscles in her legs verged on total exhaustion. She shed sweat with every stride. Her vision became edged in blackness.

The island was so close, but she didn't know if she could reach it. The human body had limits, even in emergencies. There were certain mechanical impossibilities. Any second now she would pass out, and that would be the end. In a way it would be a relief. Her legs felt clumsy and distant. She shuffled and stumbled instead of running. Against the soles of her boots the lake felt like freshly paved asphalt.

The island was only thirty yards away. *Anyone can go thirty yards*.

With a growling burst of exertion Rachel increased her pace to a full sprint. She had to reach the island before she fainted! Her legs refused to cooperate, and she fell.

Her left hand slapped the scalding surface. Then her right. She was going down, so she let herself roll forward, and with desperate effort used her momentum to regain her feet and continue running.

Vomit spewed from her lips as she reached the rocky shore of the island and pitched forward onto her hands and knees. As she held her head down, her stomach clenched again, and acidic foulness fauceted from her mouth.

She wiped the sickening taste from her parched lips. Her breathing felt ineffectual. Raising her head suddenly, trying to find fresh air above if it did not exist below, she experienced a peculiar rush as the blackness along her peripheral vision swelled inward, swallowing everything.

\* \* \*

When Rachel regained consciousness, her cheek lay against a warm stone. She sat up gingerly. The sun did not seem to have moved, and her body was still slimed with sweat, so she did not believe she had been out long.

Looking back toward the shore through the trembling heat, Rachel could barely distinguish shapes that might have been Ferrin and Jason. The heat and atmosphere of the rocky island was almost as uncomfortable as the air directly over the lake.

She got up, massaging her elbow where an ugly bruise was forming. Why had she volunteered for this? Maybe she would stay on the island forever. She could not imagine crossing the lake again.

Rachel had never been closer to dying than when she had stumbled at the end of her run. How many near misses could she expect to survive? Her thoughts turned to her parents. They had built their lives around her. Her disappearance in the arroyo had to be driving them crazy. What would they do if she never made it home? No, she couldn't acknowledge the possibility. She had to make it home, for herself, and especially for her mom and dad.

The island truly seemed to be nothing more than a big heap of rocks, some big, some small. The highest point reached perhaps forty feet above the lake. The only evidence of life was tufts of purple-gray moss growing on some of the stones.

On wobbly legs Rachel began circling the island, looking for anything besides rocks upon rocks. The clue she needed might be scrawled on a stone. Or buried. Or not on the island at all. Maybe Nicholas had his facts wrong.

She was a quarter of the way around the island, picking her way carefully so as not to turn an ankle, when she noticed a shadowy opening some distance up

the slope from the shore. Could it be the mouth of a cave?

As she approached the opening, she saw that it extended back into the pile of rocks for some distance, sloping downward. The tunnel looked ripe for a cave-in, until she noticed that the chinks between the rocks of the walls and ceiling had been filled with mortar.

Rachel walked down into the shadowy tunnel. The farther she descended, the cooler the air became. The potent stench of the lake faded. She inhaled greedily, grateful for the reprieve from the intense heat.

The tunnel extended a surprising distance. Just as she was estimating she had to be at or beyond the center of the rocky island, the round tunnel opened into a domed chamber with a floor of solid rock and a pool of water at the center. The purplish moss she had seen outside grew plentifully. Several other shafts extended upward at various angles toward the surface. All were smaller than the tunnel by which Rachel had descended to the chamber, and most were inaccessible because they were too high on the domed ceiling. Daylight filtered into the chamber through the shafts.

Why was the chamber so cool when it was encompassed by the heat of the lake? And how had this place not been flooded by white goo years ago?

"It has been ages since I've had a visitor," a weak voice greeted.

Rachel jumped, eyes darting to find the speaker. She noticed the head of an old man on the ground near the edge of the pool, half hidden by a stone. The head smiled as she made eye contact.

Before knowing Ferrin, this sight might have been sufficient to make her pass out again. Even so, the severed head was disturbing.

"Are you a displacer?" Rachel asked.

"That I am."

The head had a long white beard and long white hair but was bald on top. The beard reached high onto the cheeks, hiding all of the face except the eyes, nose, and deeply creased forehead.

"Where is the rest of you?" she asked.

A movement glimpsed from the corner of her eye caused Rachel to turn. A wrinkled arm, severed just below the shoulder, wormed over the stone floor.

"That's all I have left," the head said.

Rachel turned back to the head. "How do you survive?"

The head cocked a bushy eyebrow. "I eat moss. It's specially engineered, full of nutrients, a strain devised anciently by some wizard. My arm brings it to me. My arm also brings me water from the pool, cupped in my palm."



“What happened to the rest of you?”

“You are full of questions.”

Rachel opened her mouth to respond, but the head cut her off.

“I don’t mind. It is pleasant to converse. You aren’t a delusion, are you?”

“No, I’m really here.”

“Why have you come?”

“I’m working with Galloran, hunting for the Word.”

“Then Galloran lives!” the head exclaimed. “I expected if he still lived, Maldor would have fallen by now.”

“Galloran failed,” Rachel said.

“Tragic news. The odds have ever been against us. At least others continue to take up the cause. In answer to your previous question my body lies at the bottom of the sea. Would you care to hear the story?”

“Sure.” Rachel squatted beside the head.

The head blinked and smiled. He seemed delighted to have an audience. “Long ago I did the unthinkable. I spied on Maldor.” He whispered the part about spying.

“For years I had served him faithfully, so I was a potent spy, deeply entrenched, and I helped frustrate him many times. I had come to trust a man called Dinsrel, from Meridon, who convinced me we had to depose Maldor and prevent an age of tyranny. I believed that Dinsrel could incite a revolution.

“I was cruising northward on a warship off the western coast when I discovered that Maldor knew of my treachery. I had been spying for almost a year, and I was embroiled in what was to be my most consequential betrayal.

“I knew I was in trouble when I awoke bound securely inside a canvas bag. It is hard to keep a displacer bound for long, but they had used generous portions of rope and cord both within the bag and without, so it must have been an hour before I made any real progress freeing myself.

“While I was making a hole to escape the bag, I heard a door open. Rough hands seized me and hauled me topside. They cut open the sack, and I beheld a dreadful scene. We were surrounded by the Black Armada. Maldor’s entire fleet had assembled, including his flagship. The three warships belonging to Dinsrel had been captured. Maldor himself was present. He made me watch as Dinsrel and several other leaders were put in irons. The remainder of the rebels were executed. Maldor then publicly chastised me for my treachery, admonishing me and all who listened that any attempts to resist him would inevitably turn to his benefit.

“Somehow Maldor had learned I was unfaithful and used me to lure Dinsrel out of hiding. Dinsrel had hoped to capture the ship I was on, along with its precious cargo. Maldor had turned the attempted thievery into a masterful trap, beheading the nascent rebellion with a single blow.

“Once the executions were complete, the bodies were dumped overboard, staining the sea. I was transported to the flagship. The other ships departed.

“Maldor ordered my head severed, along with one arm. The rest of me was placed inside a heavy strongbox and thrown overboard. To this day I can feel the water around me, though I only notice it when I concentrate. I can touch the rusty insides of the strongbox. So long as my weary heart keeps beating on the bottom of the sea, I remain alive.”

“How did you get away?” Rachel asked. Her ankles hurt from squatting, so she shifted to a kneeling position.

“I was held in a cell with a fellow called Drake, a seedman, one of Dinsrel’s closest counselors, and Rex, Dinsrel’s top assassin. Rex had smuggled a lockpick into the cell in his hair. During the night he sprang the lock to our cell. Rex killed the first guard silently, but the next one raised an alarm. There was no way to rescue the others. Drake and Rex fought their way topside with me in tow and leaped into the sea.

“Rex was slain by an arrow in the water. We were miles from shore, but Drake managed to swim the distance while keeping my head above water. My hand clung to the back of his neck the whole way. Had the ship been much farther out to sea, I would not be here today.

“When Drake made it to the beach, he was exhausted. Poor fellow collapsed right there on the sand. Before sunup I roused him by flicking his eyelid. He picked me up and headed inland.

“I spent a long time as a piece of luggage, passed from person to person. After a season I received word of another defection by a displacer: Maldor’s chief scribe, Salzared. That was when I learned of the Word. A man who had learned the fifth syllable brought me here. Eventually he left. I have remained ever since, preserving a fragment of the Word, years upon years.”

“Quite a story,” Rachel said.

“Would you mind terribly lowering my lips to the water so I can take a drink? It is such a bother to shuttle water in my palm.”

“Of course. Why don’t you stay nearer to the water?” The head was about six feet away. It was a wonder the arm could bring any water to him. Rachel supposed he had a lot of practice.

“In case of a heavy rain. Twice I almost drowned, this place filled so quickly. I just barely managed to push my head away in time. It can be slow going with just an arm.”

Rachel carried the hairy, wrinkled head to the edge of the pool and lowered it carefully, holding the long beard back as best as she could, until the lips touched the surface. The head drank greedily, finally stopping with a satisfied sigh. “I have not drunk so well since Galloran was here.”

“Was he the last to visit you?”

“Correct. How did he fail? He was almost finished when he found his way here.”

“I don’t know all the details,” Rachel said. “He was captured and brainwashed. He has forgotten most of what he learned. But he helped me and a friend begin our search for the Word.”

“A shame. A good man, Galloran. You may return me to my resting place.”

Rachel situated the head as it had been before.

“We have overlooked introductions,” the head said. “I am Malar.”

“I am Lady Rachel of Caberton.”

The white eyebrows went up. “Caberton. A handsome estate.”

Rachel shook her head. “Not anymore. Galloran gave my friend and me the title, but I have heard the estate has fallen into disrepair.”

“A shame. In my day it was one of the finest. Times change when you are shut away in a cavern. This friend is male?”

“Yes?”

“And he let you brave the lake?”

“I insisted,” Rachel said. “I’m a runner.”

“You have spirit. He’s a lucky man.”

“We’re not . . . We’re just friends.”

“I assume you desire knowledge of the Word.”

“Yes, please.”

“The fifth syllable is ‘dra.’ Have you visited the sea cave?”

“I have.”

“What syllables do you lack?”

“The second and the sixth.”

“You are doing well. The sixth is in the keeping of the Pythoness, in the heart of the Sunken Lands, north and east of here. The second lies very far to the southeast, in the Temple of Mianamon. I would not know where the second

lay, were it not for Galloran. He is the only person I know to have ever found it.”

Rachel sat down. She felt relieved to have a path again. Now she could put a name to the locations of the missing syllables! And they had two thirds of the Word! Maybe Ferrin would know about the Temple of Mianamon.

“You say you served Maldor, as did that other displacer, Salzared. Do many displacers serve him?”

The head chuckled. “Have you been in a cave yourself? They all do, by covenant. We are his spies.”

Chills tingled up Rachel’s back. “All of them? Are you sure?”

“To my knowledge only Salzared and I have ever betrayed him. Our race was created by Maldor’s old master, Zokar. Things may have changed outside, but certainly not that much.”

Rachel put a hand over her mouth. “We’re traveling with a displacer.”

Malar grimaced. “How did you not know any better? Are you a Beyonder?”

Rachel nodded.

Malar looked surprised at the nod, as if his question had been intended as a rhetorical expression. “Well, that explains it. Is it just you three traveling together?”

“It is.”

“How did you fall into company with this *limb dropper*?” He spat the title as an expression of contempt.

“His head was dangling in a bag at a crossroads. His body was buried nearby. He said he had been robbed.”

Malar looked downward, as if ashamed to be a displacer himself. “A predictable setup, playing off your ignorance. Has he been with you long?”

“A good while.”

“He has been a faithful companion?”

“He feels like our only real friend.”

“Then he is an observer,” Malar said. “Confront him, and he should leave without violence, unless times have drastically changed.”

“When should I confront him?”

“Immediately. Every move you have made with him in your company has been or will be reported to Maldor. Every strength you have, every weakness, every asset, every plan. And there will be other minions of Maldor nearby, ready to strike. After you break company with him, get away fast.”

“This is a nightmare,” Rachel said.

“Life gets no more difficult than when a person opposes Maldor. Believe me, I know.”

“Do you mind if I take a drink?”

“Help yourself. You must be parched after the run across Whitelake.”

Rachel bent over at the edge of the pool and began gulping down the water. It tasted strongly of minerals and was so cold it made her teeth ache. Despite the raging thirst the first sips awakened, she had to pull back several times because it was so frigid.

“How does the water stay so cold?”

“Magic.”

Rachel stared.

“I’m not jesting. A stone that emits perpetual cold lies at the bottom. It prevents this room from becoming a furnace. Some old wizard designed this sanctuary.”

“I have another question. Do you know how I can return to the Beyond?”

Malar scrunched his brow. “There I cannot help you. It is said that long ago there were more gateways to the Beyond than now exist. I myself know of none. There was a rumor in my day that Maldor guarded a secret involving such a portal. I learned no details, and the scant information I heard came from questionable sources.”

Rachel sat down near the head. “I don’t look forward to running back across the lake.”

“I often wonder how many have died trying to cross it. In all my years here only four men have ever found me. I have dwelled here for decades. Although I was getting old when I came here, displacers age more slowly than other men and have hardier constitutions. Would you feed me some moss before you go?”

Rachel moved around the room, ripping up moss. When she squeezed it, a sticky fluid oozed out. She fed some to Malar.

“You should eat some,” Malar said. “This stuff is full of energy. It will help in your dash over the lake.”

Rachel smelled it. The moss had no scent, unless it was faintly like grass clippings. She tasted some. It was almost unbearably bland, and it triggered her gag reflex.

The head chuckled. “I wish I could say I have developed a taste for the stuff. All I can profess is a tolerance.”

Rachel forced herself to eat more. She did not want to sink into the hot lake for lack of energy because she was a picky eater.

“Good girl,” Malar encouraged.

Finally she ingested a good portion of the bland moss.

“Give yourself an hour or two,” Malar recommended. “That is when your energy should peak. Have some more water. Don’t drink any during the last thirty minutes before you run. Before you go, soak your shirt and hair. It will help you stay cool. And run to the shore to the east, right across from where you came in. It is closest, though not by much.”

Rachel nodded. She drank more water from her cupped hand. Then she lay down and fell asleep.

She awoke with the head yelling. “Lady Rachel! Lady Rachel! Wake up!”

Rachel sat up with a start, squinting and rubbing her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It has been over two hours. You should probably get started.”

Rachel stood and began her stretching routine. Afterward she submerged her head in the water, and came up sputtering and shivering. Then she soaked her clothes. Goose pimples stood out on her arms. “Hard to believe I will be hot in a couple of minutes.”

“Believe it.”

“I guess this is good-bye,” Rachel said. “Do you want me to bring you with me? Get you out of here?”

“I must remain to protect my syllable,” Malar said. “Powerful spells guard this chamber.”

“Thank you for your help. Any parting advice?”

“Be firm with your displacer. We can be a slippery breed.”

“See you later.”

“I doubt it. May you prosper in your quest. Safe journey.”

“Thanks, Malar. Safe . . . moss eating.”

# JASHER

Here she comes,” Ferrin announced, rising to his feet and brushing dirt from his pants.

Jason looked up and saw a tiny figure scrambling down the rock pile toward the lake. Relief replaced anxiety. He had felt horrible when Rachel had tumbled at the end of her run, and then as he’d watched her motionless form on the rocky shore of the remote island. Finally she had arisen, disappearing into a cleft in the rocks. He and Ferrin had moved over to the side of the lake opposite the cleft Rachel had entered, but hours had dragged past without sight of her. Jason had begun to lose hope she would ever emerge.

When Rachel reached the lake, she started jogging across. The heat in the air distorted her miniature form.

“She’s coming right at us,” Jason said. “Should we go try to help her? Maybe carry her?”

“We might do more harm than good,” Ferrin said. “One clumsy move and we all sink into the lake together. Hopefully, Rachel has recovered enough from her other run to make it back unaided.”

Jason watched Rachel intently, determined to rush to her aid if she started to falter. She kept a solid pace, and he gradually relaxed as she drew nearer to the shore. Her clothes and hair were drenched, her face was flushed, and she squinted with exertion, but her strides remained firm as she jogged off the lake and slumped to her knees, coughing violently.

“Are you all right?” Jason asked. “What can I do?”

“Just give me a second,” she gasped, rising and walking with her hands laced behind her head.

“You are amazing,” Ferrin said. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No,” she replied, still panting. “We had bad information. I found nothing. Just an abandoned cave.”

The displacer paused. “Why choose this moment to start lying to me?”

Rachel glared at him. “Because I just found out you’ve been lying to us.”

An awkward silence followed. Ferrin scratched his nose. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you are spying on us for Maldor," she accused.

"What?" Jason exclaimed.

Rachel turned to Jason. "I learned on the island that Maldor uses displacers as his spies. They all work for him."

"Did I ever claim not to be a spy?" Ferrin said calmly.

"Are you blaming us?" Rachel ranted. "Were we supposed to ask? Where we come from, when you make new friends, it's implied they won't spy on you on behalf of your greatest enemy."

"The Beyond sounds wonderful," Ferrin said, his tone guarded.

"Wait, so it's true?" Jason asked in disbelief. He felt like he had been sucker punched.

"How much do you know about us?" Rachel asked.

Ferrin shrugged. "More than you've told me. I know you come from the Beyond. I know you've consorted with Galloran. I know you're on a quest to find the Word that can destroy Maldor. And I'm sure you just acquired part of it on that island."

"You know about the Word?" Jason asked.

"Not many do," Ferrin replied, "even among Maldor's inner circle. Naturally, none of us know details."

"You've been a liar from the start," Rachel spat.

Ferrin shook his head. "Actually, I've mostly been genuine."

Rachel scowled. "You said you had been robbed when we found you at the crossroads."

"Yes. That was a lie. I told a few lies to gain your trust."

Jason balled his hands into fists. "You betrayed us." He wanted to punch Ferrin in the face. "No wonder everyone hates displacers. We were just too stupid to find out why."

Ferrin frowned and raised a finger. "I have aided and protected you. My presence has prevented numerous conscriptors and manglers from falling upon you. I have come along as an observer, not an enemy. I truly enjoy your company and think very highly of you."

Ferrin sounded hurt. Jason rolled his eyes. This was unbelievable. "So what now?"

"Come with me," Ferrin said. "I will take both of you to Maldor. You're good people. Maldor appreciates good people. If you pledge yourselves to him, he will



likely grant you comfortable positions of considerable power. I will vouch for you. You could make worthwhile lives for yourselves.”

“And if we won’t come?” Rachel said, picking up her cloak and wrapping it around her shoulders.

Ferrin lifted his hands, palms outward. “I know you’re reaching for your orantium, Rachel. I searched your things while you two slept. There will be no need for violence. Should you refuse my help, I will leave. I would never harm either of you. It is part of my role as an observer. I began my association with you knowing I was free to be your true friend. Maldor prefers it that way to help ensure more accurate intelligence. He is fascinated with the character of his enemies, and is always looking to turn the best of them into allies. At my discretion I can even help you, and I did, like when those men tried to attack you and we ended up in jail. I will never be asked to spill your blood, nor would I if ordered. I sincerely like and respect both of you. But once I am gone, you will lack my protection, and there are many enemies on your trail. Brave and resourceful as you are, you will not get far.”

“Why don’t you really help us?” Jason asked. “Abandon Maldor. With your help we might piece together the rest of the Word.”

Ferrin laughed. “I would never change sides. I could pretend to switch sides, and keep spying, if you want. Life is far from ideal serving Maldor, but it’s infinitely better than opposing him. I honestly am your friend and wish you no harm, but my first allegiance is to my duty.”

Jason frowned. “This is insane.”

“It is extremely sane,” Ferrin assured him. “Displacers learned long ago what it meant to be on the losing side. The races Eldrin sired, the Amar Kabal and the drinlings, inherited homelands, while the races of Zokar became wandering fugitives, despised and hunted. Last time the displacers fought for the wrong wizard. This time we stand with the only wizard. Do not delude yourself. Maldor will prevail. His real struggle ended years ago. Now he’s just mopping up.”

“Not if we get the Word,” Rachel said.

Ferrin laughed again. “You have no chance of finishing the Word! Maldor has monitored you this entire time. When I became your observer, I had details of everywhere you had been. When he wants to capture you, he will. If you send me away, his forces will probably swoop in immediately. You can’t imagine the resources he could bring against you. Pray he does not send a lurker.”

“We’re not going to quit,” Jason said.

“I never really expected you to resign,” Ferrin sighed. “I just wish you would. Try not to resist when they come for you. They will kill you if you fight. Or you might kill yourselves, if you’re not careful with that orantium.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Rachel said bitterly.

“Don’t be so spiteful,” Ferrin said. “You should be flattered. Maldor rarely dispatches an observer. He has not shown this much interest in an adversary for several years.”

“We’re deeply honored,” Jason said dryly.

Ferrin folded his arms. “You’re from the Beyond. Why do you care about stopping Maldor anyway?”

Jason shrugged. “It just sounded like fun.”

“Be serious,” Ferrin said.

Jason paused, reflecting. “I don’t know. I came to Lyrian by accident. I found the stupid book by accident. Then I met Galloran, who explained about Maldor. Even after leaving him, I was still most interested in getting home.”

“Why not make that your focus?” Ferrin encouraged. “I might be able to help you there. This isn’t your world. This isn’t your battle.”

Jason frowned. “It’s becoming my battle. This might not be my world, but it’s a world. A whole world. Innocent people living in fear and having terrible things happen to them for no reason. Aster was killed, and Franny had her life ruined, just for being nice to me. Norval gave his life for me. The more I see of those who work for Maldor, and the more I see of the few people who try to go up against him, the more I realize this is truly good against evil. And good is losing. What if we can change that?”

“We have to try,” Rachel agreed firmly.

“Maybe you’re smart,” Ferrin mused.

“Why?” Jason asked.

“Well, if you had submitted too easily, Maldor might have lost respect for you.”

“That was a close one,” Rachel said. “We really crave his respect.”

“You think you’re joking. His respect may keep you alive. It’s your only hope.”

Jason sighed. “We’re running out of daylight.”

“You won’t get far,” Ferrin predicted sadly. “Maldor’s servants will fall upon you within a day. You’ll resist, but it will be a fruitless exercise. Be smart enough to accept the inevitable. Nobody can blame you for that. Otherwise, no matter what you do, you’ll shortly be killed or captured.”

“None of your business anymore,” Rachel said.

“I’ll always take an interest,” Ferrin asserted. “Where are you going?”

“Like we would tell you!” Jason huffed.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

Jason shrugged.

“Let me warn you. To the northwest the mountains become impassable. North and east of here lie the Sunken Lands. You need serious provisions if you’re headed that way. It’s swampland. There’s little drinkable water. South lies Trensicourt. Stay away from there. You’ll find scattered towns to the west. The westward wilderness holds certain perils, but a person could lose pursuers there, and you will find plenty of bubblefruit if you keep both eyes open.”

Ferrin opened a pouch, removing two silver pellets and two gold ones.

“I don’t want your money,” Jason said.

“Why not? I’m just returning a gift I didn’t deserve. This may be my last chance to help you. I am headed far away.”

Jason took the pellets.

“Take this crossbow too.” Ferrin held it out to Rachel.

She shouldered the weapon.

“Sure you don’t want to accept the invitation to the Eternal Feast?” Ferrin asked Jason. “I can probably exert some influence, get Rachel invited as well.”

“I don’t think so,” Jason said.

“I recommend it,” Ferrin urged. “I’ve been there. Harthenham isn’t a ruse. The reward is real. This isn’t your fight. Maldor might lose some respect for you if you quit, but at Harthenham that won’t matter.”

“We should get going,” Rachel said.

Ferrin held her gaze before responding. “Look, final offer: Jason, accept the invitation to the feast. I’ll take you there now, and I’ll guarantee Rachel gets invited too. They’ll call off the hunt. You won’t have to face Maldor, or anyone. Meanwhile I’ll try to find how you two can get back to the Beyond. I have reason to believe Maldor knows a way. He would never tell me, but I have a knack for digging up information. When I figure it out, I’ll come get you and send you home.”

Jason hesitated. He glanced at Rachel, who appeared thoughtful as well. The offer was tempting. A big part of what he had originally wanted was a way home. What if he could lounge in paradise until a way home was provided?

“You don’t want manglers and conscriptors to drag you off to prison,” Ferrin said. “That is going to happen before long if you walk away. I’m throwing you a

lifeline. The scattered resisters who oppose Maldor won't be able to help you get home. Be smart. This is a better offer than I would make for anyone."

"I don't trust you," Rachel said.

"I'll follow through," Ferrin pledged, placing a hand over his heart. "I lied to earn your trust, but have I ever let you down? I've stood by you. Rachel, I know you want to see your parents. Don't skip your only chance to get home."

Rachel snapped. "Of course I want to see my parents!" Tears sprang to her eyes. "You can't imagine how close we are! You have no clue. But Jason is right. If we might be able to save this world, how can we walk away? Too many people around here have given up! Galloran said heroes sacrifice for causes; they do the things that others hide from. I may not be some great hero, but I won't hide from this. I could never live with myself."

"Me neither," Jason said, glad she was holding firm.

Ferrin shook his head. He picked up a rock and skipped it across Whitelake. He looked torn. When he spoke, he sounded sincere. "I might be able to understand this choice if you had any chance of succeeding. But you don't. I am telling you the truth. You will be dead or captured by tomorrow. The invitation to Harthenham will be revoked. It only remains valid if you come in voluntarily."

"No deal," Jason maintained.

Ferrin nodded. "Suit yourselves. I will convey a favorable report to Maldor. I'm striking off to the south. I won't be communicating with your pursuers. You should probably go into town for provisions, but be quick. Do not sleep there. Safe journey."

"You're a jerk," Jason said.

"Don't," Rachel murmured. "Things are bad enough."

"He's right," Ferrin said. "I deserve to lose your respect and your trust. I'm not happy with how this is ending. I'll always consider you my friends. Enough words; you need to move out. I won't be following. Forget about me. Hurry. I'd love it if you surprised me and got away." He turned and started walking.

Jason and Rachel watched the displacer make his way toward the south side of the lake for a moment; then they turned and headed east, toward the town. Scrambling down the eastern slope, they moved fast enough to make Jason nervous about falling.

"What did you learn on the island?" Jason asked as they descended.

"The fifth syllable," she replied. She told him the syllable and what she had learned from Malar about the location of the other two.

## A FEX EN DRA

“The Sunken Lands,” Jason repeated. “According to Ferrin we’ll need lots of fresh water.”

“Thanks for being brave back there,” Rachel said.

“You were pretty brave yourself. Sounds like you have great parents. It must be hard to walk away from a chance to see them.”

She shrugged and looked away, her lower lip quivering. “Yeah. I miss them. And I’m sure they’re worried about me. We do everything together. You have a close family too, right?”

“Sort of,” Jason said. “My parents are good people. I’m sure they’re worried about me. I have an older sister and brother. We all love each other, but they’ve always been closer with each other than with me. I’ve never totally fit in. The house got really quiet after my siblings left, unless I was butting heads with my folks. Honestly, I sometimes wonder if my parents meant to have me. My brother and sister both have these fat baby books full of photos and stuff. Mine is empty.”

“I’m sure that doesn’t mean anything,” Rachel said. “Parents would be more into documenting their first kids.”

Jason shrugged. “My dad is really into my brother, seeing him get into dental school. Mom has always been obsessed with my sister. The two of them love shopping together. My sister is the oldest. She married an endodontist. I’m the youngest by like ten years. When my siblings were home, at dinner I mainly listened. I think my parents try to be interested in me, but it always feels like they’re straining. Dad doesn’t even try with certain things, like baseball.”

“I’ve always kind of wished I had siblings,” Rachel said.

“Me too,” Jason replied. “It isn’t their fault. The age gap is too big. And our interests are really different. My brother is into school and debate. No sports. My sister is practically my aunt. I’m thankful for my parents. They take care of me. But we don’t really know each other, not like you’ve described with your parents. I sort of do what I want. Even when they try to ground me, I just argue until I wear them out.”

Rachel chuckled. “When my parents punish me, it sticks. But I don’t get in trouble much.”

“I’m going to get you home,” Jason said seriously. “I promise. We’ll escape whoever is chasing us, and we’ll somehow finish this quest, and we’ll go home, no matter what Ferrin thinks.”

Rachel offered a small nod.

Jason could see the town of Whitelake in the distance, situated beyond the southeast base of the conical mount. The town would be dangerous. Despite his professions to the contrary, Ferrin might have guessed they would end up there, and he could have gotten word out. Enemies might be waiting. But in town they could buy horses, which might make all the difference as they tried to flee. He checked his knife.

“Keep that crossbow ready,” Jason advised Rachel.

“I’ll keep it under my cloak,” she replied. “It’ll be ready.”

\* \* \*

Whitelake was a dusty outpost full of burly men in rugged clothing. Many wore animal skins. Most had facial hair. The largest buildings were arranged along a central road, and scattered cabins, shacks, and lean-tos stood in haphazard clusters off the main street.

Jason avoided eye contact with other men, and they generally did the same. He found a store. An old man sat out front on a sawed-off log segment, whittling. Curled shavings lay scattered at his feet. Jason and Rachel entered the store. In one corner hung several water containers. He bought a pair of large, hairy water skins. They would be burdensome when full, so he decided he would wait to fill them until he had a horse.

He hung back to see what other men bought. Rachel waited at his side, keeping her head down. Many purchased a heavy flatbread they called gutplug. Dried meat was also purchased in considerable quantities. Jason purchased a good deal of the dense bread and some meat.

A crowd was forming in a corner, with a pair of brawny men at the center.

Jason hurried Rachel out of the store and walked up the street before they could get caught up in whatever trouble was brewing. Now they needed a pair of quality horses.

“Excuse me,” said a voice from behind.

Jason turned. Before him stood a short man who once had only one arm.

Jason reached into his cloak and gripped the hilt of his poniard.

Tad held up a hand. “You are in no danger from me here. I’ve come to bargain with you.”

Jason kept hold of the knife and placed his thumb over the hidden trigger.

“Save your breath,” Jason said, taking a slow step away from the man. “We’re not coming with you.”

“I don’t expect you to,” Tad replied. “Apprehending you in town would cause a scene. We would rather handle this discreetly. I’m here to save everyone time. You are welcome to take my horse, if you wish to flee. We would prefer to apprehend you away from town. Naturally, if you want to save yourselves the trouble, you can accompany me now.”

“Where’s your horse?” Jason asked. “Does it have a wooden leg or something?”

“It’s a good mount,” Tad assured him. “It will carry both of you. Take it and go, if you please. Whatever you choose, you won’t escape.”

“What if I we take you hostage?” Jason asked.

“Getting ruthless? That man over there is the law in this town.”

Jason glanced to his left and saw a big man leaning against a pole, examining his fingernails. He wore a heavy sword.

“I told him to keep an eye on me,” Tad explained. “If you want to attack me unprovoked, have at it. But I’m really not worth the trouble. I’m the least of your problems now.”

Jason glanced around, scanning the parade of faces moving up and down the street.

Tad chuckled. “The others aren’t here with us. But they’re watching. To lose them now, you would need wings.”

“Does your horse have wings?” Rachel asked.

“Sorry.”

“Let’s see it,” Jason said.

Tad shrugged. “Be my guest. It’s the brown one tethered over there.”

Jason peered at the horse. It stood beside a few others, and looked healthy. Jason narrowed his gaze at Tad. The short man stared back evenly, one eye brown, the other blue.

“So we can just leave?”

“Sure. You won’t get far, but I was instructed to offer the option.”

“What do you think?” Jason asked Rachel.

“I think we need two horses,” she replied.

“They only gave me the one,” Tad apologized. “You have money?”

“Plenty,” Jason said.

Tad turned to the big lawman. “Know any horses for sale in town?” he called. “Good ones.”

“I have an exceptional horse,” the man replied. “Not for sale, though.”

“Everything has a price,” Tad replied.

“Okay, stranger,” the lawman said, walking toward them. “What if I said two hundred drooma?”

Tad looked at Jason. “Can you cover that?”

Jason nodded. “What’s he look like?”

“He is a she,” the lawman said. “Intelligent and reliable. She’s the black one near your friend’s mount.”

“Look okay?” Jason asked Rachel.

“Looks fine to me,” she replied. “We need to hurry.”

Jason fished out two gold pellets. “Can we take her now?”

“For two hundred?” the lawman snickered. “Be my guest.”

“See you later,” Jason said to Tad, turning and walking toward the horse.

“Count on it,” Tad called after him.

Jason was relieved he had learned something about horsemanship. He managed to mount the brown horse and guide it down the street without much awkwardness. Rachel handled her mare like a pro. They rode out of town to the south, then curled around to head east. He scanned the surrounding prairie, searching for prying eyes marking his progress. His gaze repeatedly returned to the top of the conical mountain—anyone watching from that towering vantage point would have easily noted their little change of direction.

Rachel cantered beside him. “Think we have a chance?” she asked.

“I don’t think they would give us horses if they thought we could escape,” Jason replied. “I’m just not sure what else to do. Maybe they’re counting on us making bad moves, or being lousy horsemen. Maybe we can surprise them. If we can make it to the forest, we’ll be harder to spot. Keep that orantium ready.”

The country around the town was covered in wild grass, and they made smooth progress for some time. Beyond the expansive sward, to the east and north, ranks of forested hills awaited.

Jason weighed their options. Perhaps they could dismount and let their horses loose. If they did it carefully, their pursuers might follow the hoofprints. He and Rachel could hide until after sunset, then sneak into the forest on foot. Of course, if their enemies were watching, or if they caught on to the ruse, the chase could end quickly. It was probably best to take their chances on horseback.

The sun was sinking. Jason kept a sharp lookout, but he viewed nothing across the surrounding terrain to arouse his suspicions, although the occasional scurry of a rabbit or squirrel made him start.



At a wide, shallow creek Jason and Rachel paused to let their horses drink and filled their furry new skins. They remounted and walked the horses across water-polished pebbles to the far side and up the shallow embankment.

Not far ahead arose the outliers of the forested hills. Sparse oak trees stood here and there about the sward, casting monstrous shadows as the sun plunged. Off to the left towered the bulk of an oklinder bush. Jason toyed briefly with the idea of concealing themselves in the huge mass of foliage, risking thorns and wasps rather than facing their pursuers. Of course, their enemies would probably track them there, then surround them and light the oklinder on fire.

At that moment from out of the massive bush sprang a gray horse bearing an armored rider. The bush was less than a mile away to the north, and the horse was dashing toward Jason at a terrific pace, churning up clods of earth from the ground.

“Jason!” Rachel cried.

“I see him.” He kicked his horse, veering southward, and saw another, more distant horseman closing from that direction. In the west, the way they had just come, a third rider had materialized, made into a silhouette by the setting sun.

Where had they come from? He had been alert! Only the east appeared free of riders, so he urged his horse in that direction, yelling, “Yah!” like he imagined a cowboy would. He snapped the reins and nudged the steed’s flanks with his heels.

Jason and Rachel sped eastward, their horses galloping wildly. Jason leaned forward, close to the brown neck, and rocked his hips in time with the horse’s pounding gait.

As they raced along, the sun dipped below the western horizon, and shadows became muted in the softer light. Flecks of lather began to appear on the coat of Jason’s horse.

Their pursuers herded them eastward. The riders had all drawn to within a hundred yards: one directly to their left, another to their right, and the third behind. When Jason tried to alter his course, they would draw in close, weapons flashing, forcing him to continue eastward or face confrontation.

Ahead gaped the mouth of a steep-walled ravine. He could feel his horse flagging. The other horses were bigger and more muscular than his mount, powerful animals that did not seem to tire. The men to either side wore similar armor. One clutched a battle-ax; the other held a spear.

Jason and Rachel rode into the mouth of the ravine. It was clearly a trap, but the walls were too steep for their horses to possibly climb. The horsemen at

either side fell back to join the third trailing rider. Jason spurred his mount onward, noticing how the foam was thickening on the overtaxed steed.

Rounding a bend in the ravine, Jason learned where the horsemen were driving them. A fourth horseman stood in the middle of the ravine, flanked by three bizarre creatures. The horseman held a drawn bow in his hands.

“Rein in and dismount,” the soldier commanded. He wore dark armor like the others.

Jason pulled on the reins, and his horse stopped, sides heaving. Rachel drew up beside him. They shared a worried glance. Jason heard the other horsemen trotting up behind them.

The horseman had his bow aimed at Jason. “I am Stanus, an imperial servant, and I demand your immediate and unconditional surrender.”

Jason gazed at the creatures flanking Stanus. They stood upright like tall men, covered in rounded shell-like armor that curved up over their heads. Shiny black compound eyes stared out from the barbed masks protecting their faces. Hooks and spikes protruded from their armored bodies in all directions. Each creature had four arms bristling with cruel blades of varying length and shape. Various grinders and graters covered their torsos. Jason could tell the manglers were aptly named.

“Dismount!” the horseman repeated harshly.

Jason swung out of the saddle to the ground as the other horsemen pulled up behind, blocking their escape. Rachel dismounted as well.

“If you do not resist, we will not harm you,” the soldier vowed. “You are trapped and outnumbered. Surrender your arms.”

Jason glanced back at the men behind him. He assumed the horsemen were conscriptors. One of the three, the horseman who had come from directly behind, wore no armor and bore a longsword. A patch covered one eye. The other horsemen wore helmets that screened their faces.

“Choose now,” Stanus said. “Do not force us to lay hands on you.”

Jason reached into his cloak, his hand closing over the haft of the poniard. There were too many adversaries both in front and behind.

“We have to surrender,” he told Rachel. He wondered if it was too late to bargain using his invitation to Harthenham. It was worth a try.

“We’re putting our weapons down,” Rachel called, revealing her crossbow.

As she spoke, Jason heard a sound like breaking glass. A brilliant flash originated behind a mangler, followed by a deafening explosion. The mangler blew apart, showering shards of blade and armor in all directions. A neighboring

mangler also went down with the explosion, and Status was unseated from his horse as it reared and toppled over, a long fragment of a blade protruding from its side.

Jason fell flat after the explosion. His borrowed mount bolted back down the ravine, away from the blast. Had Rachel somehow thrown the orantium? How had it landed behind the mangler? Through the smoke Jason saw one of the manglers charging at him with alarming speed. Rachel thrust the crystal sphere into his hand. "You're the pitcher," she said urgently.

From his knees he flung the globe at the attacker. The crystal sphere shattered against the creature's spiked chest. For an instant the stone flared an intense white; then it exploded with a fiery roar.

As the hot blast wave washed over him, Jason pressed his face into the ground and clapped his hands over his ears. When he looked up, what remained of the mangler lay in a twisted ruin twenty feet farther away than before. A curved blade was planted in the earth inches from Jason's head.

Jason rose to his knees and turned to face the horsemen behind him, raising his poniard. Rachel aimed her crossbow. A long-haired man was bounding down the slope, a sword in one hand, a heavy doubled-up chain in the other. He headed toward the three riders, who appeared to have forgotten Jason as they faced this new threat.

Leaping the last twelve feet to the floor of the ravine, the newcomer swung the four-foot length of chain like a flail, taking the helmet off one of the riders and unhorsing him. The long-haired man rolled under the horse and regained his feet. The man with the eye patch was bearing down on him, brandishing his longsword. The long-haired man somersaulted toward the horse, just enough to one side to avoid being trampled, staying low enough to avoid the rider's reach. From the newcomer's kneeling position, a well-timed swing of his sword slashed the charging steed's foreleg, and the horse pitched forward, churning up chunks of soil. The rider took flight, landing violently.

Jason saw the conscriptor with the lance bring his horse around. He nudged Rachel, who aimed her crossbow carefully at the horseman and pulled the trigger. The quarrel did not fire. The safety was engaged.

The long-haired man did not require the help. As the rider reached him, he spun, using his sword to chop off the head of the lance, then the chain to slam the rider from his saddle. Pouncing, the newcomer stabbed the rider as he struggled to rise, the sharp blade finding a gap in the rings of his armor.

The rider who had lost his helmet was on his feet and approaching with an ax. Rachel, who had now released the safety, fired the crossbow. The quarrel missed by inches.

The long-haired man left his sword in the back of the fallen rider and held both ends of his doubled chain. With the chain he intercepted the downswing of the ax, turning the weapon aside. Lunging past his attacker, the long-haired man swung the chain in a vicious backhand that struck the rider's unprotected temple. The man collapsed and did not stir.

The enemy with the eye patch rose unsteadily, his clothes stained with dirt and grass, an ugly gash bleeding on his forehead. He stood ten paces away from the long-haired man, longsword grasped in both hands. "Jasher," he growled. "You chose the wrong day to interfere."

"I do not know your name," Jasher said, brushing some of his long hair out of his face, "though I am far too familiar with your kind." A good portion of his hair was caught up in a roll at the nape of his neck. To either side it hung more than halfway down his torso. He wore loose brown robes, and his feet were bound in animal hides with leather thongs. A leather baldric held a sheath across his back.

"I am Turbish."

"Are you ready to die, Turbish?" Jasher walked toward him, his chain held casually. He made no move to retrieve his sword.

"What makes you think you can best me?" Turbish snarled.

Jasher laughed lightheartedly.

The chain suddenly unfurled to its full length, snapping like a whip. Turbish's head jerked back, and one hand flew to cover his nose and mouth. When Turbish removed his hand, his nose lay broken sideways across his face. A second adroitly aimed lashing left Turbish cradling his remaining eye, his sword falling from his hands.

Jasher doubled the chain again, and a harsh blow to the jaw sent Turbish's head bouncing across the ground. The headless body lunged at Jasher, who sprang nimbly aside and tripped it.

Jasher retrieved Turbish's longsword, approached the displacer's head, and finished him. He promptly withdrew the sword and put the horse with the missing foreleg out of its misery. Leaving the longsword planted in the horse, he retrieved his own blade.

Weapons in hand, Jasher trotted past Jason and Rachel without a glance, over to where the manglers had exploded. He inspected the mangler bodies,

thrusting his sword into one. The creature shrieked at a pitch almost too high to apprehend.

Jasher leaned over Stanus, who had been crushed when his horse fell. The injured horse was breathing, so Jasher dispatched it. "All dead," Jasher said, turning to Jason and Rachel. He spoke with a different accent than Jason had heard.

Jason gawked at their rescuer, still marveling at how thoroughly he had annihilated the enemy soldiers. "I'm Jason. This is Rachel."

"Jasher, exile of the Amar Kabal." He touched two fingers to his chest and briefly inclined his head.

Jason stood.

"That was an excellent throw with the orantium," Jasher said. "Galloran informed me you had one of his spheres." He spoke with the precise enunciation of a man using a second language he has mastered.

"You know Galloran?" Jason asked.

"He is a dear friend. He got word to me of your quest and bade me lend a hand. I almost reached the crossroads in time to prevent your meeting with the displacer. Once he was in your company, I chose to follow you, watching from afar. Now seemed the appropriate moment to intervene."

"I thought we were doomed," Rachel said.

"You were. Where are you going now?"

"Are you coming with us?" Jason asked hopefully.

"Of course, Lord Jason of Caberton. I will strive to keep you alive while you complete the Word."

"We're going to the Sunken Lands," Rachel said. "We need to find the Pythoness."

"A hard journey," Jasher said. "I have a horse, and fortunately two of your enemies' warhorses survived. We will ride part of the way."

Jasher retrieved the two warhorses. Both seemed unaffected by the wild skirmish. He handed Jason the reins to one. "I'll be right back."

Mounting the other, Jasher rode off down the ravine the way Jason and Rachel had come. Shortly he returned, leading the horses Jason and Rachel had ridden. "Transfer the gear you want to keep, and we'll let these poor beasts go."

Jason retrieved the furry water skin and some other articles. Rachel collected gear from her horse as well. Meanwhile Jasher heaped the bodies together and set them aflame.

“That should help blur the evidence of my handiwork. Nobody knows that I travel with you. We can use that to our advantage. Do you have what you want?”

“Yes,” Jason said.

Jasher crossed to the horse Jason had ridden. He passed his hands over the coat of the beast, inspecting it closely. “Ah!”

“What?”

“Come see. You too, Rachel.”

Jason moved closer to where Jasher stood inspecting the horse’s shoulder. He had pulled back a small flap of fur to reveal a glazed human eye embedded in the horseflesh. Jason stared at the eye, disgusted and fascinated.

“Can you guess who this belongs to?” Jasher asked.

Jason shrugged. “It looks dead.”

“Your displacer friend didn’t teach you much. This eye belongs to the displacer I just killed—Turnip, or whoever he was.”

“Ew,” Rachel said. “How?”

“Displacers can graft parts of their bodies onto other living creatures,” Jasher explained. “This talent more than any other makes them such potent spies. With his eye on the horse, he knew every move you made. Be wary of gifts from your adversaries.”

Jasher swatted the horse gently and it trotted off.

“Unbelievable,” Jason muttered. Now he understood why Tad had been so generous.

Jasher swung up onto one of the warhorses. “This ravine ends at an unscalable wall. We need to loop around to get my horse. Rachel can ride with me. Come.”

Jasher helped Rachel mount behind him. Jason climbed onto the other horse, which proved a little tricky, since it was taller than the previous horses he had ridden. The powerful steed stamped restively.

“Ride with confidence,” Jasher advised. “Your new mount is trained for battle. She can sense your uncertainty.”

Jason followed Jasher out of the ravine. Jasher’s hair trailed behind him like a banner as he cantered along. Once out of the ravine they curved around to the north and east. A small trail led up a slope to a third horse, which Jasher claimed. As he led them deeper into the forest, twilight deepened to darkness.

Eventually Jasher ordered a dismount and secured the horses. “Go to sleep quickly,” he warned. “I will awaken you early.”

Jason felt so fatigued from the day's activities that he needed no admonition.

# THE SUNKEN LANDS

The next evening Jason rested against a fallen log, his body sore from a long day riding. Jasher had led them on a winding route deep into the hills, often walking the horses up shallow streams or forging paths through heavy foliage.

Having been up since before dawn, Jason felt ready to sleep. The meal of gutplug and jerky settling in his stomach did not help his wakefulness. But Jasher had kept watch the previous night, and he had to be exhausted. "I'll take first watch," Jason offered.

"No need," Jasher said. "My kind never truly sleep. We recuperate from the day with a type of lucid dreaming. It's a trancelike state not far from full consciousness. No adversaries will surprise us while I rest."

These were more words than Jasher had spoken all day. Jason wanted to keep the conversation alive.

"Why do you keep your hair rolled up at the back of your neck?" he asked. He noticed Rachel paying attention.

"It is the way of my people, the Amar Kabal. It protects the amar."

"The amar?" Rachel repeated.

Jasher paused, regarding them with icy blue eyes. "'Amar' means 'seed.' The Amar Kabal are the People of the Seed." He turned his head and lifted the roll of hair. At the base of his skull was a raised portion of flesh the size of a walnut.

Jason winced. It looked like a huge cyst. "What's it for?"

"The amar is the vehicle of our immortality. It dislodges at our death, granting new life when planted in the earth."

"You mean you grow?" Rachel asked in amazement. "Like a plant?"

"Buried in fertile soil, the man grows from the seed within a few months. Less fertile soil requires more time. If my seed dislodged in extremely arid terrain, I might never be reborn."

Jason leaned forward. "So you've died before?"

Jasher gave a small, grim smile. "Many times."

"And then you come back to life," Rachel murmured.



“Yes. The miracle of the amar preserves my memories until a new body germinates.”

“You remember all of your lives,” Jason said.

“Every moment until every seed has dislodged and become separated from my senses. Nine times I have perished in combat. Five times I have allowed my life to be taken, because my body was nearing the end of its usefulness and I wished to start anew. Once I drowned at sea. Once I fell to my death scaling a cliff. And my First Death.”

“That must feel strange, becoming an infant with all of your former memories,” Rachel realized.

Jasher laughed as if the idea were absurd. “No, we are reborn into the prime of adulthood, the age at which we first die. Our First Death is a ceremony held around age twenty.”

“How long can your seed survive unplanted?” Jason wondered.

Jasher shrugged. “The amar can lie dormant for years. But eventually the seed would perish.”

“So if Maldor wants to truly eliminate you,” Jason said, “he would have to kill you and then destroy your seed.”

Jasher’s eyes flashed. “The destruction of an amar is the unpardonable sin. He who commits such an act incurs a death penalty, to be executed by the Amar Kabal, who from that moment onward will stand united as his enemy.”

“I take it people don’t usually destroy a seed,” Rachel surmised.

“Not often.” Jasher winced softly, as if the thought caused him pain. “On the brighter side, the hand that preserves and plants an amar may request virtually any service in return.”

“You called yourself an exile,” Jason remembered. “Are there others of your people wandering like you?”

Jasher shook his head. “Very few. I was cast out of the Seven Vales because I chose to oppose Maldor. My people enjoy independence from his tyranny. He respects their might and leaves them in peace, untouched by his corrosive influence, so long as they do not interfere with his efforts to dominate the other kingdoms. My rebelliousness endangered their peace, so they disavowed me.”

“Then can Maldor kill your seed?” Rachel said.

“Not without incurring the full consequences of the unpardonable sin. There are no exceptions to our vengeance on that matter. If it could be proven that he was behind such an act, the Amar Kabal would rise against him, even though I am an exile.”

“Why do you fight Maldor?” Jason asked.

Jasher looked into his eyes. “He committed the unpardonable sin.”

Jason scrunched his eyebrows. “Then why don’t your people oppose him with you?”

“To avoid a war Maldor pretended that the perpetrator of the crime, a displacer named Fronis, acted alone and against his orders. The Amar Kabal are not great in number, but there are mighty warriors among us, and our dead normally rise to fight again. Maldor has reason to fear us. He delivered Fronis to my people. The displacer, having been betrayed by his master, professed he was carrying out orders, but my people closed their ears and their minds and exacted their revenge on him alone. I confirmed through a trusted source that Maldor himself gave the order to extinguish the amar of my brother, Radolso. I testified to what I had learned, but since I myself did not witness the order, and since a war against Maldor could bring about the end of the Amar Kabal, my testimony was ignored. Therefore I seek my vengeance alone.”

“So you’re trying to kill Maldor?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. I bide my time, harassing him, slaying his servants, while I seek an opportunity to take his life. I must not fail, or else his sin will go unpunished.”

“Are you seeking the Word?” Jason asked.

“I am not. Eldrin designed his races to have little aptitude for Edomic. There is a prophecy among us, spoken by Darian the Seer, that when the Amar Kabal seek to speak Edomic, it will mark the beginning of our downfall.”

“But you want to help us,” Jason confirmed.

“If you can obtain the Word and use it to destroy Maldor, my vengeance will be complete. I do not need his blood on my sword.”

“You also helped Galloran?” Rachel asked.

“I was not present when he was taken. He had sent me on an errand. I would like to believe that had I been present, he would not have fallen. You have four of the six syllables?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “How did you know?”

“An educated guess. I know where the fragments are located, all save the second. Long ago Galloran described to me the location of the Pythoness in the Sunken Lands. We will find her.”

“The second syllable is in a place called the Temple of Mianamon,” Rachel said.

Jasher grinned. “Then we know our destination after the Sunken Lands. I know of the Prophetess of Mianamon, but have never visited her temple. It lies

deep in the southern jungles, beyond the limits of civilization. Let us hope the Pythoness can enlighten you. They say she has the true gift of prescience.”

Jason scratched with his fingernail at a piece of meat in his teeth left over from dinner. It had wedged in there tightly.

“How did you two come to oppose Maldor?” Jasher inquired. “Galloran led me to understand you are Beyonders.”

Jason and Rachel took turns explaining how they came to Lyrian, and how they crossed paths at Galloran’s ruined castle.

“In the end,” Jason summarized, “Galloran encouraged us to pursue the Word. He basically challenged us to be heroes. With Maldor already after me I’m not sure I had any other choice.”

“Do not dishonor your involvement,” Jasher chided. “For each of us destiny is a blend of potential, circumstances, and choices. You could flee and hide. You could bargain with Maldor. You have chosen a heroic path. Walk it without apology.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Jason admitted. “For what it’s worth, I think I’ve finally really accepted the challenge.”

“Me too,” Rachel agreed.

“You have enjoyed much success,” Jasher said. “Surely Maldor has offered you attractive alternatives by now.”

“I got invited to Harthenham,” Jason said.

“Ferrin hinted he might be able to help us get home,” Rachel added.

“Yet here you are, toiling in the wilderness,” Jasher emphasized. “The two of you picked the right road, even though it is the most difficult. This is the essence of heroism.”

“You would know,” Rachel said. “You walked away from your people to do what you felt was right.”

“I have lived many lives,” Jasher said. “I know myself. I could never have found peace while ignoring the crime against my brother.”

“How far to the Sunken Lands?” Jason asked.

“This is rugged country,” Jasher said, looking to the northeast. “The outskirts lie more than a week away. The contours of the land cause water to collect and stagnate there in a vast swamp, a festering breeding ground for foulness and slime. During a certain season the Sunken Lands become inaccessible due to rampant disease spread by impenetrable clouds of biting insects. This time of year we should survive if we take the proper precautions.”

“So we’d better enjoy the ride in the woods while we can,” Rachel said.

Jasher nodded. "The Sunken Lands will not be pleasant."

\* \* \*

Traveling with Jasher proved simple. He gathered nuts and berries and supplemented their meals with fish and fowl. After two days of circuitous wandering to confuse pursuers, he began improvising easy routes across the gentlest available terrain, occasionally finding secluded paths to follow. Sometimes on high ground he climbed a tree to get his bearings or to check for enemies, but the days passed without hardship.

By their fifth day traveling together their path through the hilly wilderness trended down more than up. Early on the eighth day, from a hilltop, they glimpsed hazy, green lowlands to the north. Late on the ninth day, beside a rushing spring, Jasher informed them that they were filling their water skins for the last time before they left the Sunken Lands.

The next day Jasher left the horses on long tethers, and they proceeded on foot. He explained that the upcoming terrain was unsuitable for horses.

After leaving the horses, as predicted the ground became boggy and the air more humid. Jason's boots squelched in clinging muck so often he eventually ceased trying to avoid it. Persistent rafts of mud on his soles added weight to his strides and sometimes made it feel like he was wearing snowshoes.

As they progressed, Jason, Rachel, and Jasher all selected long walking sticks. Several times they were forced to double back because of quicksand or impassable mires.

Evening had fallen when Jasher paused beside a pool where a cluster of large violet flowers flourished. The striking petals looked venomously bright against the dull greens and browns of the surrounding foliage.

"I hoped to find some of these orchids before proceeding much farther," Jasher said. He plucked a closed bud from a stem and squeezed the tightly sealed petals. Blue gel oozed out. Jasher licked it. "The results are not entirely pleasant, but this nectar will keep most of the biting and stinging insects at a distance."

Jason ripped off a bud and ate the gel. It had almost no taste. Rachel tried some as well. Jasher plucked a few extra buds.

Not long after leaving that pool, Jasher found a section of higher ground covered in leafy ivy. They dined on gutplug and dried meat.

"We are at the threshold of the Sunken Lands," Jasher said as he bedded down. Jason and Rachel lay at either side of him on their backs, the ivy adding some cushion beneath their blankets. "Tomorrow you will see the actual swamp."

The depths of the swamp cannot be negotiated without a watercraft. Fortunately, my people forage sporadically in the swamp to gather rare herbs and fungi. I believe I can guide us to a hidden skiff.”

“What kind of animals live here?” Rachel asked. Her tone suggested she dreaded the answer, but couldn’t resist asking.

“Our concern tonight will be serpents,” Jasher said. “Should you feel a scaly visitor coiling against you in the night, keep still. Most snakes will not strike a person unless provoked. Be thankful the night is warm. On cold nights serpents are drawn to people for warmth. I once awoke with a black-ringed water prowler curled against my chest, inside my robes. Are you familiar with the species?”

“No,” Rachel said, a quaver in her voice.

“The black-ringed water prowler is among the most poisonous of serpents. Its venom will claim the life of a strong man before he takes twenty breaths. The pain is instant and unbearable.”

Jason leaned up on one elbow. “What did you do?”

“After I gingerly peered down my robes and observed the markings of the dread snake, I lay still and dreamless the remainder of the night, perspiring despite the chill air. I may live again after I die, but there is no guarantee my seed will be planted, and occasionally an amar is defective. Even under the best circumstances death can be highly inconvenient. In the morning the serpent stirred. It exited my robes past my neck, slithering against my cheek, as if daring me to flinch or cry out. Then it was gone.”

“Are you trying to make me crazy?” Rachel asked. “Why would you tell a story like that on a night like this?”

“As a warning,” Jasher said.

“More like psychological warfare,” Rachel muttered.

“I hear the snakes like girls best,” Jason teased. “Rachel can be our snake magnet.”

“I’m walking back to Trensicourt,” Rachel declared.

“You should sleep in the middle,” Jasher offered. “It will offer some protection.”

Rachel gratefully traded places with him.

Jason eyed the surrounding ivy. He rested his head on his arms. Every rustling sound in the night set his nerves on edge. It was a long while before sleep overtook him.

\* \* \*

Jason wakened in the morning to an awful stench. He sat up, sniffing the rank air with sleepy disgust. A low fog hung over the marshland, fuming up from the surrounding pools.

Rachel remained asleep. Jasher lay with his eyes half open, crystal blue irises shifting eerily from side to side.

Jason put his nose near his wrist, and the unsavory stink was stronger. Sniffing at himself, he found that his entire body smelled putrid, his armpits unbearable, as if his natural body odor had been grotesquely magnified. Wasn't his own stench only supposed to bother other people?

Leaning over Rachel, Jason found she reeked even worse than he did. Leaning farther, he could smell Jasher as well.

Jasher fully opened his eyes. "The pungent odors of swamp travel," he said, sitting up and stretching.

"Ugh," Rachel griped, propping herself up, bleary-eyed. "What died?"

"We did," Jason said.

She sniffed her shoulder and made a revolted face. "That's us? What happened?"

"Think about it," Jasher said.

Jason shot Jasher a hard look. "The stuff from the flowers? You did this on purpose?"

Jasher grinned. "Trust me. To venture into the swamp without a means of repelling the insects is not merely inconvenient. It borders on suicide. Some of the pests are poisonous; others carry diseases. This time of year the stink should suffice to keep the insects away."

"And the bears," Jason said. "And the skunks. And the girls."

Jasher laughed, slapping his thigh. He reached up a hand, and Jason hoisted him to his feet. "Take this as a consolation. In the deep swamp there are insects as dangerous as any snake. Be glad you will not make their acquaintance. As for women, I suspect none of us will mind if the Pythoness keeps her distance."

"I wish I could avoid myself," Rachel mumbled.

The rising sun dispersed the mists. Rachel and Jason followed Jasher along a meandering route.

At length, with the sun high overhead, Jasher stopped and announced, "Here we are."

Jason had been focusing on the ground, watching for snakes. He had spotted nine so far. Two were pretty big.

Raising his gaze, he beheld the coast of a black lake, full of tall trees with spreading branches, huge arboreal umbrellas that blocked out most of the sunlight. Leafy vines hung in haphazard loops. Long beards of moss and glossy coats of slime added texture to the dark trunks. Out in the water, islands of filthy mulch and half-drowned logs showed that not all the swamp was submerged, though Jason had no trouble seeing why they would need a boat.

“You know where we are?” Jason asked.

“I think I know where our skiff should be,” Jasher replied.

To reach the water’s edge they weaved around a few reedy pools where cattails protruded like hot dogs on sticks. At one point the sludge became so deep it was almost over the top of Jason’s boots, sucking and slurping with every step.

After reaching the brink of the gloomy swamp, they skirted the murky water for more than a hundred yards. Then Jasher began tearing decayed leaves and creepers off of a low mound by the waterside.

“Here we go,” Jasher said, after stripping off enough vegetable matter to expose the wooden hull of the small vessel. “Help me uncover it.”

Before long they removed the vegetation. Working together, they flipped the skiff right side up. An eight-foot snake uncurled from under the vessel and whipped away into the water, moving in a black blur.

“That was a dangerous one,” Jasher said, staring at the ripples where the snake was lashing across the surface. “Did you notice the red dots behind the head?”

“I barely saw the snake,” Jason said. “That thing was fast!”

“Mud viper. Big one. Be glad we were on land. They’ll attack almost anything in the water. One bite causes paralysis. A few more bring death.”

Jason shuddered.

“Snakes never really freaked me out before,” Rachel said numbly.

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “Your smell should keep them away.”

“If your smell doesn’t kill them first,” she fired back.

Jasher inspected the skiff from bow to stern. “Looks watertight. Only one way to be sure.”

They pushed it over the muddy bank into the water. “Get in,” Jasher said.

Jason and Rachel stepped over the stern of the broad, shallow vessel.

“Move to the bow and sit down.”

They complied, and Jasher sprang into the skiff, the force of his landing propelling the little craft away from the shore.

The skiff rode low with the three passengers, the gunwale scarcely six inches above the water. Jasher fitted the single long oar into the oarlock at the stern and began deftly sculling the vessel deeper into the swamp.

“Need any help?” Jason asked.

“No. I can do this all day. Better if you two stay in the bow. There is a species of predatory slime that drifts on the surface of the water. It will digest flesh down to the bone. Keep a sharp lookout so I can keep it from attaching to the skiff. It’s yellow-green in color and floats listlessly until it senses prey.”

Jason sat taller, scanning the water ahead. Off to one side he spotted a fat frog squatting on a floating log. Bigger than a rabbit, the frog bulged with warty bumps.

“Big frog,” Jason said.

Jasher snorted.

“They get bigger?” Rachel asked.

“Big enough to prey on men, I am told,” Jasher whispered. “I have never ventured deep enough into the swamp to behold one. Keep a sharp lookout. We should generally avoid speaking. Certain creatures have sharp ears. It would be better if we passed unnoticed.”

Jason nodded. He kept watching the water. The only sounds were the gentle swishing of the scull and the mellow hum of insects. Jason glimpsed many more big frogs, both swimming and squatting. He saw a snake streak through the water, just as the mud viper had, and steal a big, hairy spider off of a tree trunk.

Insects abounded—dragonflies, mosquitos, gnats, water skimmers, and beetles in metallic greens and blues. As Jasher had promised, they kept their distance from the boat.

After some time Jason spotted an amoeboid shape floating in the water ahead, like a huge wad of snot. “I see some slime,” he whispered.

Jasher navigated around it.

As night fell, the swamp blackened. Jasher found a soggy island, and he and Jason hauled the craft out of the water.

“The night is dreadful in the swamp,” Jasher whispered. “Or so I have heard. I am told it is best to stay out of the water and to remain in your boat.”

A deep, resonant croak, almost a bark, sounded somewhere not far behind Jason. He gasped and turned quickly but could see nothing through the murk. Jasher placed a steadying hand on his arm.

“Was that a frog?” Rachel murmured.



The croak was soon answered by another farther off. Before long the swamp was alive with a confused chorus of deep-throated croaking. Some of the croaks were like massive belches, others almost musical, others fierce and threatening.

Jasher moved between Rachel and Jason, whispering softly. "I had heard the night sounds of the swamp were unnerving. Never did I imagine it would be like this."

"I never imagined frogs freaking me out," Rachel whispered back.

"Swallow some insect repellent," Jasher suggested.

Jason and Rachel consumed the gel gratefully.

Soon it became as dark as the bowels of a cave. Jason found that closing or opening his eyes made no difference.

New sounds joined the frog chorus. High-pitched squeals began to warble in long, quavering notes. Low moans like the winding of giant horns drifted over the swamp from far away, as if some immense creature were mourning. A sudden clicking like castanets, sometimes alarmingly close, added a startling rhythm to the cacophony. The relative quiet of the day was utterly forgotten.

"Try to sleep," Jasher whispered loudly over the increasing din. "I will keep watch."

Jason had to curl up to lie in the skiff, and he had difficulty getting comfortable. His mind raced in the blackness, imagining cunning snakes stealing into the skiff, or methodical masses of slime oozing over the gunwale, mindlessly craving his warm flesh. The ghastly clamor of the swamp would not relent. Strange dreams invaded Jason's fitful slumber.

\* \* \*

When Jason awakened, all was quiet again. And he could see, though the light was dim.

"Good morning," Jasher said in a hoarse, hushed tone. "Let's make haste today. I do not yearn for many nights like the past one."

"Is your throat okay?" Jason asked.

"A little sore," Jasher replied.

Rachel handed Jason a sandwich made of gutplug and dried meat. He wondered how long the other two had been awake. He found the sandwich difficult to chew, but his hunger made it delicious.

Jason stood up and could barely stretch because his back and neck felt so cramped. He noticed several dead snakes on the island beside the boat, heads crushed or severed.

“Were these here before?” Jason asked.

“I had a busy night,” Jasher replied.

They got the skiff back into the water.

Jason knelt in the prow, scanning the turbid water for evidence of danger.

Jasher plied the oar expertly to maneuver them through mazes of muddy islands, tangled deadfalls, and slick masses of slime. Late in the afternoon they found a treeless lake. In the center was a long, muddy island, larger than any island they had yet seen in the swamp. At the far end of the island towered an enormous tree, both in height and girth: an arboreal skyscraper, dwarfing all the other trees within view. Its mighty limbs, themselves the size of the lesser trees, fanned out hundreds of feet above to overshadow the entire lake.

On the black mud of the near bank of the island squatted a frog the size of a horse, an obese creature disfigured by bulbous warts and crowned with sharp horns. It raised its heavy head, wet nostrils flaring, as the skiff moved out into the lake.

“We have arrived,” Jasher whispered. “The Pythoness dwells within that monarch of the swamp.” He gestured at the tree.

As they approached the island, the frog sat up high, revealing a fat, pale underbelly. The rest of its slimy hide was dark gray and green. The frog emitted a low humming sound. “Think you can work the scull?” Jasher asked. “I believe this frog means to challenge us.”

Jason traded positions with Jasher, who moved to the bow, sword in hand. Under Jason’s clumsy guidance the skiff veered right, then overcorrected to the left, and eventually made a zigzag path to the muddy bank.

Over his shoulder, Jason noticed that Rachel had pulled out her camera. She snapped a couple of pictures of Jasher approaching the frog.

As the craft ran aground, Jasher sprang forward into the muck. The heavy frog shifted, letting out a terrible roar, throaty and impossibly deep and loud. Jason flinched.

Jasher advanced slowly and evenly, walking sideways, sword held vertically in both hands. The gargantuan frog took a couple small hops forward, pausing five yards away from Jasher. Quick and sudden as a jack-in-the-box a long pink tongue lashed out and curled about Jasher’s waist.

His sword flashed, severing over three feet of muscular tongue. The rest of the tongue retracted, blood spewing from the tip. The length of tongue around his waist clung there like a grotesque belt.

The frog roared with twice the previous intensity, its obscene body quivering, dark syrup gushing from its wide mouth. It squatted low, and its hide chameleoned to a darker hue that matched the surrounding muck. Its hind legs released, and the enormous frog leaped in a fantastic arc, its bulk soaring high over Jasher's head, beyond the reach of his slashing sword.

It crashed down near the skiff and slid across the slick mud to slam against the craft, bumping the vessel abruptly into the water, the sudden jerk toppling Jason over the side. Rachel screamed. Jason flailed his arms to keep his head above the surface of the tepid water. His cloak and clothes and boots weighed him down and made him flounder.

Something slick and muscular and somewhat elastic snaked around his arm and yanked him toward a gaping, razor-toothed mouth. Black liquid sprayed from the wounded tongue. As abruptly as it had seized Jason, the tongue released him, dropping him prone into the sludge on the shore with his legs still in the water.

Looking up, Jason saw Jasher carving wildly into the back of the frog with his sword. The great amphibian turned to confront the assault. A mighty sweep of Jasher's sword cleaved its horned head. Then he buried the blade to the hilt in the frog's throat, wrenching it free to open a gaping wound as the creature lurched spasmodically backward to lie in the mud, its powerful legs twitching.

"Rachel," Jason panted, rising.

The little boat drifted away from the shore, rotating slowly. Rachel grabbed the oar and began sculling it back toward the shore.

Jason and Jasher hauled the skiff well away from the water. Jason submerged himself at the edge of the water to rinse the majority of the grime from his sodden clothes.

"I've never seen a frog with teeth before," Rachel whispered.

"Nor I," Jasher replied softly. "Our adventure in the swamp is half done. Inside that tree you should find the Pythoness. You may want to consider entering one at a time. Galloran once cautioned that the tree plays tricks on the mind."

"My turn," Jason told Rachel.

"You're not coming?" Rachel asked Jasher.

"I will stand guard, protect the skiff. Without it we're doomed. You are the ones collecting syllables. Go swiftly."

"Is the Pythoness dangerous?" Jason asked.

“The question is how dangerous,” Jasher replied. “I’m not certain. But she holds the syllable, and she should help you if you can convince her of your sincerity.”

The long, narrow island widened around the tree. As Jason trudged closer to the towering tree, he observed several black mud vipers lying on the shore to his left. Rachel took his hand, her grip cutting off the circulation to his fingers. They watched the snakes carefully until they’d passed well beyond them.

At the base of the gargantuan tree Jason noticed clusters of spherical fungi, each with a small perforation in the top. Up close he marveled at the sheer girth of the trunk. He estimated it would take thirty men joining hands to encircle it. Maybe more.

They did not see an opening to the tree yet, so they began walking around to the far side. The damp ground was firmer here than anyplace else he had seen in the swamp.

Jason rubbed at his eyes. They felt itchy and drowsy all of a sudden. For a moment he paused. What was he doing? Oh, yes, looking for a way into the tree. He kept walking around and on the far side located a narrow gap tall enough for him to enter without crouching.

“You wait here,” Jason whispered to Rachel. “I’ll call if I need you.”

“If snakes or frogs show up, I’m not waiting,” she whispered back. “Be careful.”

She backed away a few steps from the yawning gap.

Jason hesitated. Anything could await inside. He took his poniard from his sodden cloak. Why was his cloak so wet? He couldn’t recall. He knew he needed to get inside the tree though. Why? For shelter? No. He needed more of the Word. He slapped his cheek and shook his head.

Cautiously he edged into the gap, continuing forward as the woody passage curved deeper into the colossal tree.

# PYTHONESS

By the time Jason emerged from the long gap into the sizable hollow inside the tree, he felt utterly baffled. A lovely young girl in her teens sat staring at him in astonishment from a wooden rocking chair. A colorful throw rug lay on the ground, and two bookshelves loaded with literature stood against one wall. Light shone from a small crystal resting on a shelf.

Jason looked up. The hollow reached high, disappearing in shadow. Why was he inside a tree? And why was he holding a knife? Hurriedly he put it away.

“Who are you, visitor?” she asked, rising, her kind voice containing an undercurrent of apprehension.

“I . . . I’m . . . not sure.”

She smiled. Her clothes were simple, but her fresh young beauty was entirely disarming. She was tall, with a slender build and a beautifully sculpted face. Her blond eyebrows arched delicately over striking eyes of the deepest green. Her skin was unblemished and fair. “You do not remember,” she said.

Jason scowled, rubbing his forehead. He had a persistent suspicion that he was somebody. The answer felt barely out of reach. He looked at his muddy boots, wondering if they held some clue. His clothes were wet. Something stank like rancid dung. Some investigative sniffing revealed it was himself. He tried to picture his own face but failed. “I really don’t.”

“No matter,” the young woman said lightly. “I am Corinne.”

“Sorry about my smell. I don’t know why I reek like this.”

“No need to apologize.”

“Where am I?”

“Inside a tree,” she said.

Jason gazed at the beauty of his hostess, trying to restrain his eyes from lingering impolitely. “Why am I here?”

“Judging by the knife you hid, you are probably seeking the Word. I recognize the emblem on the hilt.”

Jason pulled out his knife and showed it to her. "Sorry about that. I'm not sure what I was thinking. What word are you talking about?"

"A word that can destroy an evil person. You probably can't remember."

Jason pinched his lower lip, squinting at the ground, trying to will memories to surface. What was his problem?

"You look distressed," she said.

Jason looked up. "It's frustrating. I'm almost positive that I'm somebody. But I can't remember a thing. Do I have amnesia? Should I know you?"

"We've never met." Corinne took his hand and led him to sit in a second rocking chair beside hers. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

Jason thought about this. "Yes."

She walked to a section of the wall covered with crumbly white cheese, broke off a handful, set it on a wooden plate, and handed the food to Jason. Then she went to a wooden spigot protruding from a different portion of the wall and turned it to fill a crude wooden cup. She brought the cup to Jason. It held dark brown syrup.

Jason found that the cheese had a powerful taste, sharp and persistent. The sap tasted semisweet and very rich.

"Thank you," Jason said.

"My pleasure," Corinne replied. "I rarely entertain company."

"But you're so pretty," he said, surprising himself with his candor. He fleetingly wondered if he had brain damage.

She averted her eyes. "Do you think so?"

"Definitely."

"Thank you." Some color came into her cheeks. "Let me fetch you a drink."

She dipped another wooden cup into a deep basin set against the wall and brought it back full of water. Jason drained it. He looked around. Clusters of spherical fungi clung to the walls of the tree, each with a tiny hole in the top. They grew thicker higher up, out of reach, ranging in size from golf balls to softballs. He also observed a big ironbound chest in one corner of the room.

"I need to conduct a test," Corinne told him. "It should help you remember why you came here. Would you mind if I slip this over your head?" She produced a handful of black, gauzy material.

"It won't hurt me?" Jason checked.

"No," she said. "It might help you remember."

"Sure, I guess."

She pulled the fine black mesh over his head. The material fit snugly and made him work harder to breathe. He could see almost nothing. His thoughts returned to his mysterious identity. And suddenly he remembered. "I'm Jason!" he exclaimed.

"Why have you come here?" a female voice asked from behind him. He felt a knife at his throat. "Don't move; just answer."

Jason felt bewildered. Why was he in a chair? What was over his head? His last memory was entering the tree. One instant he had been stepping through the entrance, the next he was sitting in a chair with his head covered and a knife at his throat. "I'm looking for information about the Word that can destroy Maldor." He hoped this was what the knife wielder wanted to hear.

"Who sent you?"

"Galloran," he replied.

"Why didn't Galloran come himself?" the voice asked.

"He's blind," Jason said. He heard a quick gasp. "He failed in his quest and passed the mission along to me."

"Fair enough," the voice said, tugging the mesh hood off his head.

Jason looked up, blinking, perplexed, at a beautiful young woman. Suddenly he recognized her. Of course, it was Corinne. "Why'd you take it off so quickly?" he asked.

"I'm satisfied that you deserve to be here," Corinne responded.

Jason thought about that. The hood had only covered his head for an instant. No words had been exchanged. He still had no recollection of who he was, or why he had come here. "Have you lived here long?" Jason asked.

"All of my life."

"You were born here?"

She shrugged. "My early childhood is blurred. I grew up here." She sat down in the other rocker.

"Is this a village of trees?" Jason wondered.

"No. This tree is encompassed by a deadly swamp. But we're safe in here."

"Why?"

"Do you see the puffballs growing on the walls?"

"Sure."

"They create an atmosphere that keeps all creatures away. Except people. The atmosphere here blocks the memory of any who enter, while unveiling another portion of the mind."

"So when I leave I'll recall who I am," Jason said, relieved and intrigued.

“And forget all that happened here. Were I to leave, I would lose my identity as you lost yours upon entering.” She sounded sad.

“Are you a prisoner here?”

“In a sense. If I leave, I surrender most of my memories of my mother and her mission. I would hardly know myself. I must stay to preserve what I know of the Word. It is the only way to stop a very evil man.”

“Do many people come seeking your information?” Jason asked.

“One man visited a few times when I was younger. Galloran. You know him, but you can’t remember. His mark is on your knife.”

“Where is your mother?”

“She died some time ago. It happened very suddenly.”

Jason glanced around, not seeing any remains. He decided not to ask. “Tell me about this Word.”

“I know only the sixth syllable, ‘puse.’ But I preserve another important piece of information. Galloran told Mother that the second syllable is the hardest to find. So, against the possibility that he would fail, he cheated to aid future seekers of the Word. The second syllable is tattooed just inside the shoulder blade of a man called Kimp. The letters are tiny, stacked one atop the other. Apparently, his body bears many tattoos.”

Jason stared at Corinne. “All you know is one syllable of some word and information about another syllable?”

“It’s a magic word,” she said defensively. “You will remember its importance when you leave. Trust me. I am certain you came here seeking this information, though it clearly seems absurd to you at present.”

Jason could see she was upset. This Word and her mission to preserve the sixth syllable obviously meant a lot to her. “I’m sure you’re right. Wait, once I leave, I’ll forget what you told me.”

She nodded.

“Then maybe you should write it down.”

“I’m not supposed to write any of this. Nor are you. It constitutes a heinous crime.”

Jason furrowed his brow. “But you said Galloran wrote a syllable.”

“And took a great risk. What he has done cannot be undone. If his action became known, all would be lost.”

“I’m sorry, this just doesn’t make any sense right now. What should I do?”

“Take a couple of puffballs with you. Their excretions will permit you to recollect our conversation. If all else fails, I’m sure you’ll return shortly. We’ll



figure out a way to make this work. You're the first visitor I've welcomed on my own. My mother was called the Pythoness, but that will mean nothing to you at present."

"Okay," Jason said, struggling to grasp the situation. "If I get outside and can't figure out what to do, I'll be back."

Corinne plucked a pair of puffballs from a corner of the hollow. "Safe journey," she said, handing them to Jason. He liked it when their hands touched.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me?" he asked hopefully.

Sudden tears shimmered on the surface of her green eyes. "I must remain."

Jason felt sorry for her. "Good-bye, Corinne."

On his way out through the gap he sensed his mind becoming muddled. He shook his head sharply. Surely he would not forget Corinne. He could overpower the mind-numbing effects of a bunch of mushrooms. He focused intently. Corinne. Puse. Second syllable tattooed on Kimp. Corinne. Puse. Second syllable tattooed on Kimp. He was almost through the gap. Corinne. Who was Corinne? Did he know her from school? Oh yes, he went to Kennedy! What a breakthrough! His name was Jason Walker!

He was outside the tree now. He was supposed to remember something, wasn't he? Yes, he had been swallowed by a hippo and was now in a swamp with an amazing swordsman named Jasher. Everything returned in a rush. Why did he have these puffball mushrooms in his hands? His last memory was sitting hooded in a chair while a woman asked questions.

"How did it go?" Rachel asked.

"I have no idea," Jason replied. "How long was I in there?"

"Pretty long," Rachel said. "Like half an hour."

He turned around, studying the gap in the tree. He could remember going inside. Then his memory skipped to sitting in a chair. The swamp was darker now. Had he fainted? Had he met the Pythoness? He had a foggy memory of a beautiful woman. He could not tell whether the beautiful face had been real or dreamed. Had the Pythoness cast a spell on him? His mind felt unclear.

"What's with the mushrooms?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know," Jason said. "Are they a clue?"

"You have two," Rachel noted. "Are we supposed to eat them?"

"I'm not sure," Jason replied, sniffing one of the mushrooms. He felt unsteady. Strange, he didn't recall actually exiting the tree, but now he stood

outside, facing a strange girl. She was shorter than Corinne, and not bad-looking. What were these pretty girls doing in a swamp? “Who are you?”

“Are you kidding?” Rachel asked.

“I remember talking to Corinne inside the tree,” Jason said, sniffing the mushrooms again. He squeezed one gently, and dusty spores the color of brown mustard smoked out of the hole in a little cloud. “These mushrooms let me remember her, but they block out everything else. Apparently we’re searching for a word?”

“Yes,” Rachel said eagerly.

“The sixth syllable is ‘puse.’ Does that make sense?”

“Absolutely. Anything else?”

He explained about the second syllable being tattooed on Kimp’s back.

“Do you know where we can find this man?” Rachel asked.

“Corinne didn’t explain,” he said. “Should I ask her?”

“In a minute,” Rachel said. “Tell me more about how these mushrooms work.”

Jason explained the ability of the mushrooms to suppress memories and keep swamp animals away from the tree.

“Useful information,” Rachel said. “Think Corinne would let us sleep in her tree tonight? It would be much safer than out in the swamp. This place is horrible at night.”

“Can’t hurt to ask,” Jason said. “She seemed nice. Can you tell me what we’re doing while I’m using the mushrooms? That way I’ll be able to better explain our situation to Corinne.”

Rachel rehearsed all sorts of information to Jason. He came from a state called Colorado in another world. He was on a quest with Rachel and Jasher. She related details about other syllables of the Word, warning him not to pronounce any of the syllables together. She went on and on. Nothing felt familiar, but the story was amazing.

“We should go talk to Jasher,” Rachel suggested after concluding the recap.

“Okay,” Jason replied, looking around. “Where is he?”

“On the other side of the tree. Watch out for snakes.”

They hurried around the tree.

“Jasher, come quick,” Rachel called in a hushed voice.

Jasher approached from the far side of the island, taking long strides, sword in hand. Behind him lay the corpses of three gigantic frogs in inky pools of blood.

Without repeating the sixth syllable, Rachel hastily explained what Jason had learned inside of the tree. She relayed their intention to remain inside the tree overnight.

“I know of the man you mentioned, Kimp,” Jasher said. “You say the animals of the swamp will not approach the mushrooms?”

“That’s what Corinne told me,” Jason explained. “She would know.”

“We should place some of those mushrooms in the skiff,” Jasher said. “Hopefully they will protect it overnight and provide us with a safer journey out of the swamp.”

“Great idea,” Rachel agreed.

They gathered several of the puffballs from the outside of the tree and stashed them in the skiff. Then Jason set his mushrooms in the skiff as well. Away from the mushrooms he swooned, dropping to one knee. Since he’d forgotten Corinne again, Rachel and Jasher explained the plan to him. In the end Rachel leaned close and whispered the sixth syllable.

## A FEX EN DRA PUSE

With daylight waning, they gathered before the gap in the mighty trunk. Jason led the way in. Soon his only memories were his recent conversation with Jasher and Rachel and his discussion with Corinne.

Corinne rose as they entered. “Back so soon? You brought friends!”

“This is Jasher and Rachel,” Jason explained. “I’m Lord Jason of Caberton. At least that’s what they told me outside. We were wondering if we could stay the night in here, since it’s getting dark out and the swamp is very dangerous at night.”

Jasher stood staring back and forth between Corinne and Jason, blinking and rubbing his temples, eyes dazed. “You say my name is Jasher?” he asked Jason in a bewildered voice. “That doesn’t feel right.”

Rachel folded her arms, a line appearing between her eyebrows. “Rachel. Rachel. Doesn’t ring a bell. What’s the matter with me? What stinks?”

“We stink,” Jason said.

“You are welcome to stay the night,” Corinne said, after which she patiently explained to Jasher and Rachel why they could remember nothing. While she explained, she gathered cheese from the wall and two cups of sap. Jason declined more food but accepted a cup of water. Corinne knelt on the floor beside the two rockers and nibbled on some cheese.

“Since we have no memories, tell us about yourself,” Jasher suggested. He seemed relaxed and happy.

Corinne looked shyly into her lap. “There is little to tell. I have lived in this tree for most of my life. The only people I have ever seen besides my mother are Galloran and the three of you. Since my mother died, I have lived here alone, protecting the syllable she believed was so important. I love to read. You don’t have any books, do you? I have read all of mine so many times.”

Jason and Jasher patted at their clothes and then shook their heads. Rachel checked her satchel. No books.

“What was your mother like?” Jason asked.

Corinne cocked her head slightly and stared blankly, as if gazing at her mother in her imagination. “She was always kind to me, and very patient. I grew taller than her before she passed away. In her youth she enjoyed much luxury, growing up in a noble house. She possessed a gift for perceiving future events, and some people despised her for it. They called her Pythoness because they believed she communed with unclean spirits. But her gift did not work that way.

“Mother was not old when she came here, entrusted with a portion of the Word that can unmake Maldor. Because of the puffballs the memories of her past came from her journal. Sometimes we would have discussions or do lessons outside the tree, but naturally, I can’t remember any of that. She took the responsibility to guard the Word very seriously. She told me that before I was born, more people came here. But Galloran was her favorite. She cared for Galloran very much. She expected him to return for us someday, with news that Maldor had fallen. I’ve kept hoping for the same thing. Mother said she saw him leading me away through the swamp in a vision, and her visions were usually accurate. If he is now blind, that may never happen. The future is never certain.”

“You poor girl,” Rachel said.

Corinne gave a faint, sad smile. “The worst part was losing Mother. One day she fell to the floor, clutching her breast, gasping for breath. She reached for me and tried to speak, but I could not understand her. I never knew what she was trying to tell me. She was old when I was born. Quite old when she died. I did not know how to save her, so she perished in my arms.”

Corinne spoke these final words as if in a trance. Now she stopped, regarding her visitors with her green-eyed stare.

“Would you like to get some sleep?” she asked.

“You read my mind,” Rachel said. “I’m exhausted.” She stood up, slapping Jason on the shoulder. “We must have had a long day.”

Corinne led Jason and Jasher to a thin mattress big enough for two. “Sleep here. Rachel, you can sleep on the rug using your blanket roll. I sleep just fine in the rocking chair.”

Lying down on the soft mattress, Jason suspected he had not slept well lately. He fell asleep quickly.

\* \* \*

A gentle hand was shaking Jason’s shoulder. He opened his eyes to look up into a lovely face framed by long thick hair the color of honey.

“It’s daybreak,” Corinne whispered.

Jason elbowed Jasher, who sat up with a start. “Time to go,” Jason said.

They arose from the mattress and ate some cheese. Rachel bundled up her blankets. Jasher wore a water skin, which Corinne insisted upon filling with fresh water.

“Would you like to join us?” Jasher asked as they prepared to leave.

“I must remain to protect the Word,” Corinne replied. “If you succeed in stopping Maldor, perhaps you could send someone to notify me.”

“We will,” Rachel promised. “Thanks for your hospitality.”

“Sorry we can’t remember ourselves,” Jason said. “I hope we would be more interesting with our personalities intact.”

“I had a fine time with all of you,” Corinne assured them. “You cannot imagine how lonely I get. Safe journey.”

Jasher led the way out. By the time they had exited the tree, they were staring at one another in befuddlement.

“Did we go in?” Jasher asked.

“I think so,” Jason said.

“This could be early morning or late evening,” Rachel observed.

“The light is in the east,” Jasher said. “I feel rested, and my throat feels better.”

“So it’s morning,” Jason said.

“Do you remember anything?” Rachel asked.

Jasher squinted. “Not a thing. Do you feel dizzy?”

“A little woozy,” Jason agreed. “Let’s get back to the boat.”

They walked around the tree and along the narrow length of the island toward the far tip where the boat lay. Jasher stopped short, raising a hand to halt

the other two. A large, amorphous shape shifted ahead in the dimness.

They stood motionless, breathing softly, Jasher's hand on the hilt of his sword, Jason reaching for his knife. Up ahead something else moved. "Frogs," Jasher whispered. "A small army."

They held still, letting their eyes adjust. Soon Jason could make out at least a dozen gigantic frogs surrounding the skiff. Their skin blended with the mud. A few were bigger than any they had yet encountered: huge muddy boulders, almost elephantine in size. "They know we need the boat," Jasher murmured in disbelief.

"At least they didn't think to sink it," Rachel whispered.

"Don't give them any ideas," Jason worried.

"The puffballs probably saved the skiff," Jasher guessed. "Although the frogs surround it, none are too close. Looks like the frogs I slew yesterday are gone."

"Cannibals," Jason muttered. "What now?"

Jasher motioned for them to lean in closer. "All else failing, we retreat to the tree. I have one more orantium globe. A good blast should destroy a frog or two and might disperse the others. There is no chance we will overpower them by the might of our blades alone."

"Especially since mine is hardly big enough to lance their warts," Jason said.

"I'll want a little more light before we move," Jasher said.

They stood in silence. The frogs made no noise and no aggressive movements. Occasionally one or two would shift position. The nearest stared at them unblinkingly. The light increased. Jasher got out his orantium globe.

"Wait," Rachel whispered. "Why don't we try throwing mushrooms? If the puffballs kept them out of the boat, they might drive them away."

Jasher grinned. "At least one of us is thinking. Back to the tree. No sudden movements."

Slowly and quietly they returned to the tree and collected several puffballs each, taking care not to squeeze them. Once within throwing distance of the congregation of immense frogs, they began lobbing puffballs into their midst. The mushrooms soared in high trajectories before landing in faint bursts of yellow-brown dust.

As the first three landed, the frogs sprang for the water, colliding with one another in their panicked haste. Only six puffballs were thrown before Jason and his companions stopped to watch the last of the monstrous amphibians scrambling and splashing into the murky water.

Still bearing several puffballs each, Jason, Rachel, and Jasher raced to the skiff. Near the small craft Jason felt hazy. He remembered Corinne, and he realized that the puffballs had masked his memories again. Jasher and Rachel appeared confused.

“Move the mushrooms to the front of the boat,” Jason advised. “It doesn’t really matter whether Rachel and I have our memories. Jasher, try covering your nose and mouth.”

They moved the mushrooms. Jasher took a sash from his robes and wound it around the bottom half of his face.

“I’m back,” Jasher said. “I take it the mushrooms were flummoxing us.”

“We’ll keep them at the front of the boat,” Jason said.

The three of them shoved the skiff into the water. After Rachel and Jason climbed to the front, Jasher launched them.

“Keep watch,” Jasher said, his voice muffled by his sash. “I intend to make use of these mushrooms. We’re going to sacrifice stealth for speed. I want out of this swamp before nightfall.”

“We’ll keep watch,” Rachel assured him.

“Anything specific we’re looking for?” Jason asked.

Jasher told them about the slime. “I forget that you two don’t have your memories.”

“Not many, at least,” Jason replied. “Which reminds me: Corinne asked us to let her know if we succeed and destroy Maldor, but without the mushrooms we might not remember.”

Jasher held up a finger. “If you overthrow the emperor, I promise to personally inform all of the custodians of the Word.”

“We’re not going to overthrow anyone if we don’t get moving,” Rachel said, staring around uneasily.

Jasher began sculling aggressively, the long oar sloshing loudly in the water, throwing big ripples across the otherwise calm surface. Jason sat attentively in the bow, occasionally giving a puffball a gentle squeeze, hoping to keep creepy animals away.

The day was hot and humid. Jason enjoyed the strange and exotic sights of the swamp. He wondered whether he had appreciated the scenery as much on the way in. He doubted it. After all, this time the sights were among his first memories. The animals he glimpsed stayed a good distance from the skiff. Only the floating masses of slime seemed indifferent to the cargo of puffballs.

\* \* \*

The light was dimming when they finally saw the muddy bank marking the end of the swamp and the beginning of the marshlands. Jason noticed an unusual, fat frog sitting on a log.

“Look,” he told Jasher, pointing. “That one has a third eye.”

Jasher instantly fell flat. “Get down. A human eye?”

Jason and Rachel huddled low in the vessel. “Maybe. It’s on the chest.”

“Blast!” Jasher jerked a small knife from his boot. In one motion he rose to his knees and flung the little weapon.

Jason peeked over the gunwale and saw the knife pierce the frog just above the foreign eye, sending the amphibian backward off the log. Grimacing, Jasher speedily guided the skiff to the bank. “Somewhere, a displacer has learned where we are and that I travel with you. Someone must have stumbled across our trail. There must be quite a manhunt underway. We should move swiftly.”

He and Jason dragged the boat out of the water and overturned it. In the waning light they hurriedly concealed the vessel. Jason noticed that Jasher’s hands were raw and covered with dried blood and the flattened remains of burst blisters.

Night fell as they marched away from the edge of the swamp. Unseen clouds blotted out many of the stars. Well after dark they found a fairly dry spot to bed down. Rachel had kept many of the puffballs from the boat, and she arranged them around their little campsite. The presence of the mushrooms let Jason rest easier.

\* \* \*

The next morning, before any evidence of sunrise had colored the sky, Jasher awakened Jason and Rachel. They set off immediately, munching on the last of the gutplug while they walked.

“We must clarify our next move,” Jasher said.

“Okay,” Jason agreed. “Who is this guy Kimp?”

Jasher smiled. “That was the best news we took from the swamp. Finding the Temple of Mianamon would have been a daunting journey. Now locating the second syllable will be simpler, though perhaps equally perilous.”

“At least it’s still perilous,” Jason said with mock relief.

Rachel elbowed him. “This is serious.”

“Kimp serves Maldor,” Jasher said. “Not long before Galloran was taken, he captured Kimp. That must be when he placed the tattoo. You must understand, Kimp collects tattoos. Most all the surface of his body is marked in green and



black ink. Assuming the mark left by Galloran remains, all you must do is read it off his shoulder blade.”

“Do you know where this guy is?” Rachel asked.

“That is the best part. I do. I spend a lot of my time monitoring Maldor and his chief henchmen, searching for opportunities to strike. Kimp currently dwells in Harthenham Castle, where the Eternal Feast is held.”

“I have an invitation to the Eternal Feast,” Jason reminded everyone.

“It has been on my mind,” Jasher said.

“Will they still accept it?” Jason wondered.

“Have you formally rejected the invitation?” Jasher asked.

“No.”

“This is your first invitation?”

“Yes.”

“There was no expiration listed?”

“No.”

“Then it remains in force.”

“Did it go in the water with you?” Rachel wondered.

“No,” Jason said. “I had it in my bag in the skiff. It should be fine.”

“Where is the castle?” Rachel asked as they pushed through a stand of thick reeds.

“Several days east of here,” Jasher said. “Assuming our horses remain where we left them. On foot the journey could take weeks. We’ll have to approach our mounts carefully. If our pursuers found them, it would be an ideal location for an ambush.”

“What can you tell me about the Eternal Feast?” Jason asked.

“Maldor invites his most dangerous adversaries to the Eternal Feast at Harthenham Castle. Duke Conrad presides over the festivities. None who have answered the invitation have ever returned.”

“Is it a trick?” Jason asked. “Are they killed?”

“Supposedly not. At first guests typically send correspondence explaining that they intend to prolong their stay. Inevitably word comes that they have chosen to remain indefinitely.”

“Must be good food,” Jason said.

“I’m sure they don’t make leaving easy,” Jasher said. “Getting in should require little effort. Getting away will be the challenge.”

“Have you been invited?” Rachel asked Jasher.

“Three times.”

“But you never went.”

“I never considered accepting. Nor did Galloran. But now Jason must. Traveling to Mianamon would take months, and it would lead us into the most dangerous and unexplored terrain on the continent.”

“Could you and Rachel come with me?” Jason asked.

“I would if I could,” Jasher said. “My opportunity to accept has passed. The third invitation issued an ultimatum. It was dated, and I let the date lapse. I am the only man I know of against whom Maldor has issued a standing death warrant. He no longer cares to beguile me. I am to be killed at any opportunity. If I joined you, I would be slain on sight.”

“What about your seed?” Rachel asked.

“If he could destroy my amar in secret, Maldor would not hesitate. Otherwise I suppose it would be locked away where it could never be planted.”

Jason rubbed his chin. “So we need to separate,” he said reluctantly.

“What about me?” Rachel asked. “Why can’t I get invited?”

“That could happen,” Jasher said. “It would take time. Jason’s high-profile maneuvers in Trensicourt brought the invitation more swiftly than usual.”

“I know five syllables of the Word,” Rachel said.

“Maldor can’t imagine you know more than four,” Jasher replied. “The clue in the lorevault is something Galloran did on the sly, since the fourth syllable required a voyage to a distant island. The syllables you get in secret, like the one at Harthenham, give you a huge advantage. If Maldor thinks you only have four syllables, he may feel sufficient confidence to enter your presence, giving you the chance we’ve been waiting for.”

“It all depends on getting this last syllable from Kimp,” Jason said.

“We need to act quickly,” Jasher said. “This opportunity could dissolve.”

“I get it,” Rachel said. “There isn’t time to build my reputation enough to get me invited.”

“Hopefully, our separation will be brief,” Jasher said. “Rachel will remain with me. We’ll await you, Jason, outside of the castle. We’ll be there to help, horses ready, when you make your escape. You must keep foremost in your mind the understanding that you are not there for the feast. Forgo all pleasures and diversions. Accept as little hospitality from your hosts as you can. Beware gifts from Maldor. He gives gifts to people much as fishermen offer worms to trout.”

\* \* \*

Five days later, from the cover of a wooded hillside, Jasher, Jason, and Rachel watched a rider clad in scarlet galloping in the distance, his bright cloak flapping like a flag. With Jasher as their guide they had recovered their horses and made their way across the wilderness without incident.

“The Scarlet Riders are Maldor’s couriers,” Jasher explained. “This is one of their regular routes. They carry no arms, and therefore we in the resistance do not harm them.”

“I just flag him down?” Jason asked.

Jasher nodded. “It would be the quickest way to redeem your invitation and access Harthenham Castle. Rachel and I will never stray far from you. But if they ask about me or Rachel, we parted ways three days ago. I’ll keep us hidden.”

Jason nodded. It was now or never. He nudged his mount with his heels and flicked the reins. The responsive steed charged down the hillside. Within moments Jason rode out of the trees and waved his arms at the distant rider. The rider reined in his horse and watched as Jason approached. At length the rider spurred his mount toward Jason.

A few minutes later the rider pulled up beside him. The chestnut horse was the biggest Jason had ever seen, making his own large steed appear average.

“Speak,” the rider demanded in a powerful voice, using far more volume than seemed necessary.

“My name is Jason.”

His eyes widened. “Lord Jason of Caberton?”

“Good guess. I have an invitation to the Eternal Feast, and I want to accept it.”

Jason held up the invitation. The rider was speechless.

“It got a little wrinkled and dirty,” Jason apologized. “I’m tired of trying to be a hero. It’s pointless to resist the emperor. Can you help me out?”

The young man in the scarlet cape looked nervous. He surveyed the area in all directions.

“This isn’t a trick,” Jason said. “How do I declare my acceptance of this generous invitation?”

The scarlet rider relaxed a little. “This preempts the message I’m carrying,” he said. “I will see you safely to Bresington. An official escort will take you from there to Harthenham.”

“Lead on,” Jason said, forcing himself not to glance back toward where his friends were hiding.

# THE ETERNAL FEAST

A carriage advanced along a well-kept dirt road, passing grassy fields divided by whitewashed wooden fences. From the window Jason stared across the pastoral expanse at his first view of Harthenham Castle.

Tall and graceful, white walls gleaming, the castle seemed plucked from a fairy tale. Beautiful towers abounded, topped by steep conical roofs aflutter with banners. Elegant flying buttresses linked several of the towers to surrounding walls. Dramatic statues of majestic figures glistened on the parapets like angelic gargoyles. Elaborate gold and silver traceries embellished the stonework. Bright flags and standards decorated the great outer wall, which shimmered with opalescent sparkles.

Count Dershan, who sat in the carriage alongside Jason, gestured at the castle. “Many tons of fine crystal were crushed into the mortar to give the walls of Harthenham their ethereal glitter,” he recited reverently. He leaned toward Jason as he spoke, stroking the bushy mustache that flowed into his shaggy sideburns.

“It’s spectacular,” Jason agreed, glancing at the man who shared his compartment. Count Dershan had met him back in Bresington about an hour ago with the carriage and a change of clothes. After almost two days following the scarlet rider Jason was again bedecked in courtly finery and seated comfortably in a plush compartment.

“The highest figure on the castle, the warrior Elwyn, is constructed of pure gold, and his sword is composed of burnished platinum.”

Jason could see the warrior, one hand clinging to the loftiest spire, the other holding his sword aloft. Jason imagined the spire snapping, sending the proud golden warrior on a breakneck plunge into some hidden courtyard. He wished it would happen just so he could see the look on Dershan’s face. The count obviously took great personal pride in the opulence of Harthenham.

“Sadly, we cannot observe the grounds from here,” Dershan continued. “The topiary is exquisite. The garden unparalleled. From the proper perspective the

reflecting pool creates a perfect illusion of the castle inverted, complete with clouds and sky.”

“I can hardly wait,” Jason said, hoping to seem like the model newcomer. “I hear the food is pretty good.”

Count Dershan chuckled at the understatement. “Over two hundred specialists devote their lives to collecting and preparing delicacies from all over the continent. No king has ever dined as we do.”

Before long the carriage rattled over the drawbridge and came to a stop beside a portico in an immaculate yard. Several servants stood at attention, wearing powdered wigs and fine livery. None bore weapons, and Jason noticed no guards.

Under the portico awaited a dignified man of about forty years with excellent posture. He wore an impeccable white uniform, complete with a profusion of medals on his chest and gold-fringed epaulets on his shoulders. A rapier was belted to his trim waist. His black hair was clipped short and slicked back, emphasizing his widow’s peak. A meticulously trimmed goatee bristled at the end of his chin. His bronze skin contrasted with the light uniform.

A footman opened the carriage door and set a stool on the ground. Jason followed Count Dershan out of the coach, accepting a hand down from the sallow-faced attendant.

Dershan guided Jason directly to the uniformed gentleman. “Duke Conrad of Harthenham, allow me to introduce our esteemed guest, Lord Jason of Caberton.”

Duke Conrad inclined his head and torso stiffly. Jason mirrored the slight bow. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Conrad said, his words clipped and precise. He extended a gloved hand, and Jason shook it, the firmness of the grip catching him by surprise. Duke Conrad stood a few inches shorter than Jason and stared up at him with keen, dark eyes. His face had a narrowness that accentuated his hollow cheeks and aquiline nose. Jason noticed that Conrad had twisted his gloved hand slightly so that Jason was shaking with his palm upward. A friend had once told Jason that whichever hand was on top won the handshake. Jason opened his hand, ending the subtle contest.

“I was glad to receive your invitation,” Jason said.

“And I am overjoyed to welcome you into my home,” Conrad said with little enthusiasm, his perceptive eyes weighing Jason. “Please feel at liberty to explore the castle and the grounds. Consider all of it yours.”

Jason felt a sudden temptation to ask if he could have one of the duke's medals. Or maybe just unpin one and put it on. But the goal was not to make this man an enemy. The goal was to appear docile. "I appreciate your hospitality," he said.

"Come," Conrad instructed, whirling briskly and leading Jason through an elaborate set of double doors. "Your feast of welcome is in the final stages of preparation."

Jason followed Duke Conrad down a grand hall to a marble fountain. Emerald liquid splashed from the spout to the basin, giving off a fruity scent. A massive gold and crystal chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling, hundreds of candles flickering. A row of evenly spaced servants stood unmoving against the wall.

"Would you rather dine immediately or retire to your rooms for a time?" Conrad inquired.

"What would you prefer?"

"An answer."

Jason felt chagrin. Conrad had abrupt arrogance down to an art. "Then I would like to see my rooms first, and eat soon afterward. Will that work?"

"You are the guest of honor," Conrad said dryly. "We are overjoyed to accommodate your schedule. Derrick."

A pale servant detached himself from the wall. "Yes, milord."

"See that the feast is set to commence in thirty minutes."

The man bowed low and hurried away.

"Cassandra. Conduct Lord Jason to his apartments."

A woman against the wall lowered her eyes and curtseyed. Jason could not help noticing that several of the female servants were very pretty.

"This way, milord," Cassandra said courteously.

Jason followed her down halls and up stairs, past magnificent hangings and sculptures, until they reached a set of white doors accented with golden scrollwork that resembled leafy vines. The doorknob was worked into the likeness of a rose.

Cassandra opened the doors and escorted Jason inside.

Jason paused in the doorway, gawking.

He had never seen a more elegant room.

Blues dominated the color scheme, complemented by whites and silvers. Artful arrangements of brilliant flowers blazed from ornate vases, making the room smell like a blossoming field after a gentle rain. Masterful paintings and

sculptures were spaced tastefully around the spacious salon. Unobtrusive murals of pastoral scenes decorated the high ceiling. Jewels studded the luxurious furniture. Jason could envision any article in the room behind glass in a museum.

In a neighboring chamber he found an enormous bed. His parents owned a king-size. This was emperor-size, piled with infinitely soft pillows. The deep mattress felt ready to embrace him. The silky sheets were cool and smooth. The fur comforters folded at the foot of the bed surpassed the plush covers at Trensicourt.

“Are the accommodations satisfactory?” Cassandra asked hesitantly, as if half expecting him to launch into a disgusted tirade.

“It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“I’ll let you know when the feast is ready to begin,” she said, gliding from the room.

Upon further exploration Jason discovered another room with a beautiful bathtub carved out of polished azure stone. His balcony overlooked glorious gardens and manicured hedgerows. Fountains of colored water geysered high into the air. Peacocks strutted about the lawn, some fanning out their spectacular plumage. There were peacocks with feathers of lustrous blue and violet, and others with plumage shimmering in vibrant shades of lime green and yellow, or fiery hues of red and orange. One exotic plot was devoted to a topiary teeming with elaborate hedge sculptures. Some were shaped geometrically, some like fanciful animals; others appeared to be people. One was clipped into a striking likeness of Duke Conrad standing rigid in his uniform.

Jason sat down on the balcony tiles, chin in his hands, considering the allure of Harthenham Castle. Who wouldn’t crave to be a permanent guest here? It would be like living at a luxury resort, the sort of life most people could never attain no matter how hard they worked.

But he knew it was a prison in disguise. A beautiful distraction designed to sidetrack enemies of the emperor. He wondered if the servants were secretly the guards. Certainly they were spies. He wondered if Cassandra carried hidden weapons or poison.

He would need to remain vigilant. He had to find Kimp and make a hasty exit. Despite the size of his bed, he would have to avoid getting too comfortable.

Jason rose and wandered his rooms, examining the artwork. He was thumbing through one of the books in his modest personal library when Cassandra entered.

“The feast is ready, milord,” she said with a curtsy. She escorted him to the dining hall, passing him off to a stiff young servant who directed him to the foot of a very long table that dominated the room. The dining hall was an elongated rectangle with a high roof. Painted carvings hung on the walls. Many guests were already seated. Others were filing in. At the far end of the table sat Duke Conrad. To his immediate left Count Dershan sat grooming his mustache, and to his right a bulky bald man leaned forward in his seat, a feathered hoop dangling from one earlobe, his bare scalp crawling with tattoos. Judging from the tattoos, the bald man was probably Kimp. Jason wondered how often he took off his shirt.

Duke Conrad met eyes with Jason and gave a slight nod. The smug contempt in his gaze implied that Jason now belonged to him.

As Jason scanned the rest of the people at the table, a familiar face surprised him. About halfway down on the left Jason spotted Tark. He looked the same as he had in the revolving tavern, except he was dressed like a prince. Their eyes locked, and Tark waved feebly, clearly embarrassed.

Duke Conrad arose from his high-backed chair, and the remaining guests scurried to their seats, assisted by servants. Many of the other guests were overweight, several grotesquely so. Jason was comfortably the youngest guest in attendance. Duke Conrad cleared his throat, and the room became silent.

“We are gathered here to welcome our newest comrade, Lord Jason of Caberton, who joins us in seeking refuge from a hostile world.” Conrad raised a crystal goblet. “To new friends.”

“Hear, hear; to new friends,” the crowd babbled, hefting goblets and drinking to the statement. Jason filled a spare goblet with water and drank.

“Let the feast commence,” Duke Conrad exclaimed, gesturing like a showman.

The guests cheered. Doors swung open, and an army of servants stormed the table bearing heavily laden trays. Jason could scarcely believe the bountiful variety of edibles that was soon spread before him.

Steaming slabs of prime rib, legs of lamb, cuts of ham, heaps of fowl, fillets of fish, rows of sausage, morsels on skewers, and platters of tender shellfish all vied for his attention. Bowls of fruit, some peeled and slathered in cream, some whole, sat opposite plates piled with vegetables both familiar and foreign.

Jason watched the guests attack the food without restraint. Soon flabby chins dribbled with grease wherever he looked. Chubby fingers were occasionally dipped into silver bowls of scented water and wiped clean on linen napkins only



to instantly become messy again as they shuttled more food to eager mouths. Each person at the table had a full complement of silverware, but few paid heed to spoons or forks. Jason noticed that Duke Conrad, Count Dershan, and the tattooed man all ate in moderation with utensils, abstaining from the frenzy displayed by the other guests.

Jason selected a thick cut of steak and found it was the most succulent, perfectly seasoned meat he had ever tasted. It was pink through the center, with a hint of red, and melted juicily in his mouth. As he sampled other delicacies, he began to understand the exuberance displayed by the other guests. He ate decadent shellfish marinated in buttery sauces, chilled fruit that exploded with sweet flavor, and poultry smothered in melted cheese.

Everything was superb.

The variety of delicious tastes was overwhelming.

Only the obscene gluttony of the other guests distracted from the perfection of the meal. Jason noticed that Tark ate little. He did not look over at Jason again. As more courses arrived, Jason tried to pace himself, savoring the food instead of wallowing in it, trying soups, breads, and tangy cheeses.

As the meal proceeded, a group of servants appeared, bearing white, bulbous fruit the size of watermelons. "Oklinger" was repeated around the table in excited whispers.

Servants ceremoniously punctured the glossy white sacks, catching the spilling fluid in silver decanters. A servant carried the first decanter to Jason and filled his goblet. The fluid was clear. He took a probative sip, then gulped down the contents. The natural juice was sweet enough to please the palate, but not so sugary as to make it unrefreshing. The delightful taste was unlike anything he had ever sampled. Since the servant was hovering, he held out his goblet for a refill.

Fresh platters of food continued to appear. The eagerness of the guests began to abate. Jason picked at salty stuffed mushrooms. His stomach felt full of lead.

"And now for dessert," Duke Conrad cried at last, dabbing his lips with a napkin.

"Dessert, dessert," echoed many in the company.

Jason wiped his mouth with a napkin. How could he eat anything else?

"I wonder," the Duke began slyly, directing his gaze toward Jason, "if our new friend has ever sampled the liver of a wizatch."

Jason found the entire party staring at him. "I haven't had the pleasure," Jason said, trying to sound formal, "unless I know it by another name."

Interested murmurs followed the declaration.

Liveried servants busied themselves clearing away the remains of the feast. Tark got up and left the table, shoulders slumped.

Duke Conrad coughed into his fist. “The wizatch is a rodent unlike any other. The finicky creature feeds exclusively upon the nectar of the cheeseblossom—it would starve before taking nourishment from another source. Cheeseblossom nectar is, of course, poisonous to all other known organisms.

“Inside the wizatch, cheeseblossom nectar undergoes a transformation wherein the poison is neutralized and the taste is refined. The liver becomes saturated with purified nectar. Consumed fresh, the liver of a wizatch is the most delectable delicacy of my acquaintance. As you are one of the uninitiated, I insist you inaugurate our dessert by sampling the first batch.”

“Hear, hear,” resounded voices up and down the table.

Jason could not conceive of a more disgusting after-dinner treat than rodent livers, but he succumbed to the general pressure with a grin and a nod. “I’ll try anything once.”

Servants placed a silver bowl before each guest seated at the table. Jason’s contained five beige livers, each smaller than his thumb. Beside Duke Conrad an officious servant held up a shaggy rodent with three tails. “This fortunate wizatch will be spared,” the servant announced.

“Until tomorrow!” shouted a flat-featured man with black hair down to his shoulders. The diners laughed at the remark.

Jason held his fork tentatively. He glanced down the long table. A double row of expectant visages offered encouragement.

“No time to lose,” prompted a blubbery woman wearing a necklace of enormous pearls.

Jason peered into the bowl. The livers looked raw and squishy. He lifted one with his fork and put it in his mouth. As he bit down, his eyes widened. The liver had ruptured, and the warm creamy interior tasted delicious, somewhat like sweetened vanilla with a hint of cheese and banana.

“What is your recommendation?” Duke Conrad inquired, as if the reply were inevitable.

“You were right—these are delicious.”

“Then let us proceed,” Conrad replied, taking a bite.

All along the table people began eating the tiny uncooked livers. Jason greedily finished his without hesitation. With each his enjoyment grew. He could tell he would crave them in the future.

“Now that our palates have been cleansed, bring forth the rest of the dessert,” Conrad commanded with a jovial wave of his hand. Cakes, pies, tarts, éclairs, cinnamon rolls, fruit breads, sugared nuts, puddings, and sherbet appeared in towering quantities. The guests welcomed the onslaught of sweets.

Jason already felt ready to burst, but he tasted a few of the desserts, finding them as delicious as the entrees would have led him to suspect. He could see how living at Harthenham would easily lead to obesity. Across the busy table Duke Conrad saluted Jason with an upraised goblet.

# DUEL

Jason spent the next couple of days becoming familiar with the castle. He roamed the grounds, discovering an aviary, a menagerie, an archery range, a kennel full of big boarhounds and mastiffs, two swimming pools, and a large area of closely mown grass for playing a game that seemed a hybrid between soccer and croquet. Inside the castle he found game rooms featuring billiards, darts, duckpin bowling, strategic board games, gambling, and an enclosure where animals were pitted against one another in mortal combat. He came across an area for fencing, a music room full of instruments, and an intimate, elegant theater.

Importantly, on the first day exploring, Jason also found a bathhouse. Inside, men waded and bathed in scented pools of varying depth and temperature. He went by several times after discovering it but had not yet seen Kimp.

Although subsequent meals did not display varieties as extravagant as Jason's feast of welcoming, they retained sufficient quality to delight the most discriminating critic. Beverages and snacks could be obtained all day and night from various locations.

On the evening of his second day exploring, Jason located a strange room deep belowground where castle guests, lounging on divans and futons, munched on small, individual pies. Pungent incense permeated the air, and in one corner musicians tapped at marimbas and plucked peculiar stringed instruments. Several of the reclining diners were people Jason had seen at his welcoming feast. Others were emaciated wretches, with waxy skin and greasy hair.

The flat-featured guest with long black hair who had joked about the wizatch relaxed on a nearby divan. He used his fork to motion Jason over.

As Jason approached, the man swallowed a bite of his pie. "Have you ever experienced lumba berry pie?" he asked quietly, dabbing his lips with a fabric napkin.

"No," Jason replied.

The man offered his fork. Jason declined. "I can get my own." He could see two attendants carrying trays of pies around the room.

"My name is Drake."

"Jason."

Drake took another bite. "One mustn't overindulge in lumba berries," he confided, eyes rolling with pleasure. "Their more common name is hunger berries. No other food tastes more divine, or leaves the diner more satisfied. But a person who regularly consumes the berries rarely lasts long."

"Why?"

"Lumba berries do not truly nourish. In fact they rob your body of nutrients. When consumed in significant quantities, they destroy your appetite for any other food. Soon only lumba berries will satisfy, and you blissfully devour them until you starve to death."

Jason glanced around the room, paying more attention to the diners who looked unhealthily skinny. "Do you limit yourself?"

"Sometimes. It can be hard to resist such a pleasurable poison. Lumba berry pies have killed me three times."

Jason scowled. "What brought you back?"

Drake grinned, showing a gold tooth. "I am something of an oddity. I have the dubious distinction of being the only member of the Amar Kabal to accept an invitation to Harthenham."

An attendant approached a neighboring patron, an obese man wearing a silk robe. Using pinchers the attendant held out a pie. The man considered for a moment, then held up a hand, stood, and walked away.

"You're a seed person," Jason said.

Drake nodded. "You strike me as an oddity yourself. I kept an eye on you at the feast. Proud. Vigilant. Pensive. Not characteristics of a young man who has turned his back on the world and surrendered."

"Maybe."

"You're clearly here with an agenda. Others have started out that way. If I noticed, Conrad noticed. He doesn't miss much."

Jason didn't like how much Drake was guessing. "What brought you here?"

Drake stretched. "Boredom. Weariness. My people lead an austere existence, treasuring simplicity and avoiding addictive indulgences. After enduring many lifetimes I no longer found joy in living. I tried devotion to various causes; I tried love; I tried conformity; I tried creative endeavors; I tried solitude. I contemplated destroying my amar by fire. Then I received an invitation to the

feast. I had never fully explored reckless self-indulgence. So I came here to conduct a final experiment.”

“Any conclusions?”

Drake smirked. He took a small bite of pie. “My people are right. Indulgence is emptiness. I have probed the limits with food and frivolity. There is no real fulfillment in meaningless rushes of pleasure. You try to conceal the emptiness with more extravagance, only to find the thrills becoming less satisfying and more fleeting. Most pleasures are best as a seasoning, not the main course.” He held up the pie. “However you try to disguise it, you end up feeding without being nourished.”

“So why stay?”

Drake studied Jason. “Empty or not, the lifestyle is addictive. It breeds fear of real life. By abstaining for a season, I can restore some of the thrill to certain delights. Outside these walls I am an embarrassment to my people, an enemy to an emperor, and much less able to bury my shame in excess.”

One of the nearby cadaverous pie-eaters began to cough violently. Thin muscles stood out on her neck. Nobody in the room paid her any mind.

“Should somebody help her?” Jason asked.

Drake regarded the coughing fit. “She is in the final stages of starvation. Nobody can help her now. All she can do is keep ingesting hunger berries to distract her from her condition.”

Drake took another bite.

“What a waste,” Jason murmured.

“Eating lumba pie is a dangerous game,” Drake acknowledged. “Sampled in small quantities on occasion, the pie can be a harmless and delightful diversion. But the more one eats, the more one craves the berries, and the deeper they seem to satisfy.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “I think I’ll skip the pie. How many lives have you spent at Harthenham?”

Drake took another bite, holding the food in his mouth, his eyes closed, savoring it before finally swallowing. “Six. Some were quite brief. None were long. But this is the last.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “You’re going to destroy your seed?”

Drake shook his head slowly, setting the remains of his pie aside. “That choice has been taken from me. After my last rebirth my amar did not form properly. Occasionally this defect occurs among my people. Perhaps the reckless

living caught up with me.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Most of my seed already fell off. There is no question. This will be the last of my many lives.”

“I’m sorry.”

His eyelids drooped. “If anything I should feel sorry for you and your kind. You only live once. Most of the guests here are drowning in gluttony having hardly lived. Shed no tears for me. I have experienced plenty. I brought this doom on myself, poisoning my system through pleasurable excess. I do not ascribe my condition to chance.”

Jason watched as Drake settled back on the divan. “Don’t you want to make something of your last life?”

“Let’s not dwell on me. Look to yourself. What are you doing here? Spying? Fishing for information? Planning to redeem some forgotten hero? A word of caution. If you do not mean to stay, you need to leave now, and you need to leave quietly. Whatever your intentions might be, this place will get a hold of you.”

“I won’t be here long.”

Drake smirked. “Nearly every person here but me has told themselves the same thing. Be careful what you eat. Lumba berries are not the only perilous delicacies here. Many of the foods and seasonings are deliberately addictive, including wizatch livers.”

Jason nodded. “I know another seed person.”

“Who would that be?”

“His name is Jasher.”

For the first time Drake looked truly interested. “I know him mostly by reputation. I traveled with his brother for a time.”

“His brother is dead.”

“Radolso?”

“Yeah, that was his name.”

“In the ground, you mean?”

“His seed was destroyed.”

Drake leaned forward, distressed. “How?”

“I don’t know details. But Maldor did it.”

“Are the Amar Kabal seeking vengeance?”

“There was no hard evidence. Maldor claimed the killer was acting alone, and he delivered some displacer to them. A source who Jasher trusts knew the killer was acting under orders, but his people wouldn’t believe him. Your people

have a treaty with Maldor. Jasher chose exile, and he's out for revenge on his own."

Drake leaned back and closed his eyes. His voice became mellow again. "The things one misses when one wallows in ecstasy. Are you working with Jasher now?"

"I better not say."

"Understood, understood. Pleased to meet you. I need to sleep."

"Have a good nap."

Drake smiled faintly.

Jason suddenly recalled a detail Rachel had related about her visit to the middle of Whitelake. "Wait a minute. Drake. Did you know a displacer named Malar?"

Drake raised his eyebrows, but his eyes remained closed. "Sure, sure, the traitor, I knew him." His voice was dreamy and distant. "Found him, did you? Clever lad. A regular Dinsrel. I need to rest." His head sagged, and his breathing became regular.

Jason left the room feeling disgusted.

\* \* \*

The next morning, after a light breakfast followed by a delicious massage, Jason headed for the bathhouse, determined to stay there until Kimp showed up. He had confirmed by talking to other guests that the large man seated near Duke Conrad at the welcoming feast had indeed been Kimp. Jason carried some fruit in a basket in preparation for his stakeout.

On his way to the facility he noticed Tark sitting on a stone bench beside a row of blossoming rosebushes. It was the first time Jason had seen Tark since the musician had walked out of the welcoming feast.

"Hello, Tark," Jason said, coming alongside the bench.

Tark glanced at him with bloodshot eyes. He grunted a greeting.

"Mind if I sit here?" Jason asked.

The short, stocky man shrugged indifferently, then bowed his head, placing his face in his meaty hands.

"When did you get invited here?" Jason asked.

Tark looked up. "I suppose I need to face this," he grumbled in his raspy voice. "I arrived just over a week ago. The temptation overcame me. I figured that since I had caused enough harm to Maldor to get invited to Harthenham, I would quit fighting and spend the rest of my miserable life surrounded by other



deserters. Better to die a gluttonous failure than a hungry one. I almost believed the lies I told myself. Then you showed up. I know a sign when I see one. Once again I have betrayed my friends. Just like before, I started off right and then quit when the opportunity arose.”

He returned his face to his hands and shook with ragged sobs.

Jason waited politely.

Finally Tark lifted his tear-streaked face. “You must have been up to some mischief to get in here.” He wiped his leaking nostrils with the back of his hairy-knuckled hand.

“I do what I can.”

“Tell me.”

“I became chancellor of Trensicourt. I also helped kill a bunch of conscriptors, manglers, and a displacer.”

“I never got a displacer,” Tark said in admiration, sniffing. “Good work.”

“How did you end up here?”

Tark brightened a bit. “It all started the day I left you. I felt really good, full of resolve, ready for my penance. As it happened, on my way up the road out of town I was stopped by a conscriptor. He had questions about a fellow who fit your description, and a girl who sounded like Rachel. I acted very compliant, and then I put my knife through his back. His mangler friend came at me, blades whirling, and I was sure I had arrived at the brink of my waterfall, if you take my meaning. But I flung the knife, and it found a weak spot, slaying the monstrosity. I could hardly believe it.

“I retrieved my knife and raced off into the woods, leaving behind the corpses and the horse. From that day onward I have waged a private war against the minions of Maldor. I sank a barge, burned down some warehouses, even undermined a bridge. In a pass east of here I buried a whole column of conscriptors and manglers in a landslide. I’d wager that stunt was what finally earned me an invitation to the feast.”

Jason nodded. “Do you plan to remain here?”

Tark stared at his feet. “I had intended to stay. Not a soul has ever left. They die wallowing in vices, all of them men and women who once bravely defied Maldor. Some expire choking on lumba pie. Others are so fat they can’t leave their beds. I stumbled across Bokar the Invincible my third day here—you know, the great hero from Kadara? Legendary swordsman. A placard beside the door proclaimed his identity. He was lying on his back on an enormous bed like a beached sea elephant, his face drowning in blubber. Attendants were

cramming meat pies down his greedy throat. I asked if he was really Bokar the Invincible. He said he was, his mouth full of food. I asked why he gave up. He said he hadn't. He said he was planning to leave in a couple of weeks. I almost laughed. The only way he was going anywhere was in a really big wagon pulled by a whole cavalry of horses. Strong ones.

"I decided some undignified end like that would be fitting for a coward like me. But now my mind is mending. I could be convinced to leave. What about you?"

Jason lowered his voice. "Wait a day or two, and we can leave together."

Tark grinned. "My will is reviving. Fate has made you the guardian of my self-respect. Once again I will abandon self-pity. I will join you, Lord Jason." He pulled out the same heavy saw-toothed knife he had wielded in the Tavern-Go-Round, holding it so the sun glinted on the polished blade. He scrunched his heavy eyebrows. "If you mean to leave so soon, why accept the invitation in the first place?"

"It's a secret. But I had a legitimate reason."

Tears pooled in Tark's eyes. "You came to show me the way." He spoke with amazed realization. He slid off the bench, dropping to his knees. "I knew it. Tell the truth, are you a mortal being or some heavenly apparition?"

Jason stifled a smile. "I'm a friend. I'll warn you when I plan to leave. Try to stay out of trouble."

Tark blushed, swiping a hand over his nose again. "As you say, Lord Jason. I'll scout the perimeter. I've noticed they tend to keep the drawbridge shut. We're never permitted beyond the castle wall. They may resist our attempt to depart."

"We have to find a way," Jason said.

"Aye, we'll set a new precedent. Perhaps others will follow."

"We'll see," Jason said, rising. "I need to visit the bathhouse."

"On your way." Tark shooed him. "We'll talk later."

\* \* \*

Jason's fingers and toes had shriveled into pink prunes by the time Kimp appeared. Jason had been in and out of the water all day, watching the servants use heated rocks to adjust the temperatures of the various pools. Count Dershan had come and gone, as had other men Jason recognized from his explorations of the castle.

Jason was relaxing in a cool, shallow pool when Kimp entered. The man was built like a power lifter, his bulging physique graffitied in green and black ink. Only his face was unmarked.

Kimp waded into the hottest pool, an almost comical expression of relaxation transforming his gruff face. Transferring to the hot pool, Jason sloshed over to Kimp, the water just above his waist.

“We haven’t met,” Jason said, extending a hand. “I’m Lord Jason of Caberton.”

“Kimp,” the hulking man grunted, giving Jason’s hand a limp shake. “This is where I come to unwind.”

It was an unmistakable invitation to leave him alone, but Jason pretended to miss it. “I haven’t seen you around since the feast.”

“I stay busy here. I’m the duke’s majordomo. And I tend the dogs. You don’t ever want to upset the duke, friend.”

“I don’t plan to.”

Kimp sniffed and twisted, arms raised. Jason heard joints popping.

“I like your tattoos,” Jason said.

Kimp cocked an eyebrow. “Do you, now?”

“They’re really intriguing. Astounding artwork. Where were they done?”

“All over.” His demeanor became much friendlier. “My back has the best one.” Kimp turned around.

Jason could not believe his good fortune.

Just inside the left shoulder blade, beside the mast of an elaborate ship spanning the majority of Kimp’s broad back, inscribed so tiny that Jason had to lean in close, were three letters arranged vertically and spaced unevenly. The second syllable was “rim.”

## A RIM FEX EN DRA PUSH

“The detail is amazing,” Jason said, trying to bottle his excitement. He had the Word!

“You ever see a jollier picture? My own idea. An artist in Ithilum rendered it. Name of Sgribbs. Only fellow to see for quality work. Took seventeen hours.”

The sailors on the ship were all women. They climbed the rigging, hauled lines, hefted frothy mugs, and tussled with one another. On the bow stood a disproportionately large woman wearing a captain’s hat and an eye patch, her hands on her rounded hips.

“That is the most intricate tattoo I’ve ever seen,” Jason said respectfully. “You’re a walking gallery.”

Kimp turned back around, grinning. “You want one?” he asked, giving Jason a friendly slap on the chest with the back of his hand.

“A tattoo? Well, I’ll have to think it over.”

Kimp frowned. “Nothing complicated. Start simple. How about a shark on your chest? I do great sharks.” He lifted a leg with sharks all over the front of the thigh to prove it. They were pretty good sharks. One was devouring a terrified woman.

“You do tattoos yourself?”

“I’m an expert. I have all of the equipment. If you don’t like sharks, I can do wolves. How about it?”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“Is it the pain?” Kimp asked. “The process only stings a little, not bad at all. Then you have the rest of your life to enjoy it. Nothing could look more lordly.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“Once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“So is drowning in quicksand. I expect I’ll agree; just let me think it over. Decisions always take me a little time. I’ll get back to you.”

“You do that.”

\* \* \*

That night at dinner Jason and Tark sat together at the long table. Duke Conrad, Count Dershan, and Kimp were also present, along with many of the guests who had attended Jason’s arrival feast. Drake sat across the table from Jason, not paying him much attention.

Servants wheeled out a tremendous cooked bird on a cart. The enormous fowl was called a ponchut; it was big enough to rival an ostrich, with soft, pink meat. Servants moved the cart around the table, portioning out slices of the bird along with a creamy sauce.

“You want to leave now?” Jason murmured to Tark.

Tark glanced over. “Whenever you decide.”

“I’ve looked around; the wall is high, and there are no doors. The drawbridge never seems to open.”

“I’ve reached a similar conclusion.”

“Might be hard to scale the wall.”

“Seems designed that way.”

Jason ate some of his meat. The sauce made it delicious.

“I think we need to declare our intent to leave,” Jason said. “We should do it publicly, so there will be pressure from the other guests to let us go.”

“Might be worth a try,” Tark said, fidgeting with his napkin.

Jason ate more meat. He took a sip of fruit juice. Then he stood up.

“I have an announcement to make,” Jason declared.

Everybody froze, including a servant in the middle of handing a plate to a plump woman. Only Duke Conrad made announcements at dinner.

“I want to publicly thank Duke Conrad for his hospitality,” Jason continued. The other diners visibly relaxed. Several tapped their stemware with their forks in approval.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed my stay here,” Jason said, nodding graciously at Conrad, “but the time has come for me to depart.”

Silence.

Drake covered his mouth with a napkin, stifling a laugh.

Conrad’s features hardened. Muscles pulsed in his lean jaw. Count Dershan forced a laugh. “A fine jest, Lord Jason,” Dershan approved hopefully.

“No. I am leaving this evening. I don’t mean to offend anyone.”

Duke Conrad arose, tossing his napkin aside, and walked down the table to Jason. The two stood facing each other. “No man has ever refused my hospitality,” Conrad said softly, his tone lethal, his eyes demanding submission.

“Neither have I,” Jason replied. “I accepted it. I thank you for it. And now I’m leaving.”

Duke Conrad frowned. “My invitation offered indefinite participation in the Eternal Feast,” Conrad said. “All who come here recognize this. To accept less insults my honor.”

“I mean no insult,” Jason said. “I was under the impression I was welcome to stay but free to leave when I wanted.”

“All men are free to do as they will,” Conrad said, his voice dangerously reasonable. “But you have not even remained here a week. Such an affront is insupportable. Are you resolved to pursue this course of action?”

“I am.”

“Then you force my hand. I, Duke Conrad, challenge you, Lord Jason of Caberton, to a duel!”

“No, milord,” exclaimed Kimp, rising from his chair. “Let me handle this miscreant.”

Duke Conrad motioned for Kimp to be seated. "Lord Jason is a member of the aristocracy. Disputes among nobles are best settled by nobles." Some of the guests nodded sagely at this statement. "I repeat myself—I challenge you to a duel, tomorrow at dawn."

"I refuse," Jason said. "Can I go now?"

Several of the stunned guests stifled laughs. Drake tried to pretend he was coughing. "I am your superior in rank," Duke Conrad insisted, voice quavering with indignation. "You have no right to refuse."

"I do anyway."

"Let me rephrase. I will not allow you to refuse, no matter how great your cowardice."

"In that case I accept."

"Rapiers at dawn," Conrad declared.

Jason thought about movies he had seen where people challenged each other to duels. "Wait. You made the challenge. Don't I get to choose the weapons?"

"Perhaps, if we were of comparable rank, but it is unthinkable that I should condescend to permit an upstart lordling the selection of arms. Consider yourself fortunate I do not simply let Kimp dispose of you."

The injustice of the situation made Jason's ears burn. He had an audience. He needed to state his case convincingly.

"I am not only Lord Jason of Caberton," Jason explained, partially restraining his anger. "I am the chancellor of Trensicourt, second in command after the regent."

The guests murmured. For an instant Conrad's rigid expression faltered. "Untrue. You abandoned your office, and Copernum was reinstated."

"I abandoned nothing!" Jason reached into his pocket and pulled out the chancellor's signet ring. "I left secretly on a private errand. Anyone who claimed my title in my absence will answer to me when I return. Should I go get my mantle?"

Duke Conrad was clearly taken aback by Jason's vehemence.

"Furthermore," Jason pressed, taking advantage of the shifting momentum, "I am a guest in your house. You invited me, which implies some equality between us, even if I had no title. Or do you consider your guests inferiors?"

Around the table eyes glared. Conrad searched for support. Count Dershan shrugged.

Conrad cleared his throat. "The weapon with which I dispatch you is of little consequence," he said. "Choose."

To his mild astonishment Jason had won the argument, leaving him unsure what weapon to select. He knew what he didn't want. Conrad would hack him into lunch meat with swords or axes or any traditional armaments. What if they wrestled? Jason was bigger. Conrad probably knew moves that would take away the size advantage. Everyone was awaiting a response.

"Billiard balls," Jason said.

"Billiard balls?"

"Is there an echo in here?"

"I am unfamiliar with the tradition."

"Among my people it's a common practice," Jason invented. "The combatants stand at opposite ends of a billiard table full of balls, then throw the balls at each other until one is dead."

"How novel," Conrad sniffed. "Very well. An absurd death for an absurd lordling."

"Hold on. If I win, will I walk out of here untouched by your henchmen, free to leave with my insult to your honor settled?"

"This castle represents neutral ground," Duke Conrad said. "Besides, no man may be compelled into a mortal duel twice in the same day."

"How comforting. Tomorrow at dawn then?"

"At dawn in the billiard room. Count Dershan will serve as my second. Who will serve as yours?"

"I will," Tark blurted, standing up. "And I will depart with Lord Jason when the conflict is resolved."

Duke Conrad nodded briskly, eyes narrow. Those around the table sat openmouthed. Jason and Tark walked away together.

At the door, aware that all eyes were still on him, Jason paused to address a servant. "See that my meal is sent to my room."

"Yes, milord," the man replied.

"I prefer 'Your Mightiness.' "

"Yes, Your Mightiness."

"See to it, then."

\* \* \*

"Why billiard balls?" Tark asked. They stood in the topiary.

Jason shrugged. "Conrad would cut me to ribbons if I fought him with a sword. I can throw balls hard. Hopefully harder and better than he can." He picked up a stone and chucked it at the hedge shaped like Conrad. It missed.

Tark pretended not to notice.

“Think you could swipe some billiard balls?” Jason asked.

“No problem.”

“Would you wake me up early? I want to have time to prepare.”

\* \* \*

The sky was gray when Tark awakened Jason.

Before a big game, Jason often had trouble sleeping. Last night had been his worst such experience. No matter how he tried to calm himself, Jason had felt too wired to sleep. He had paced. He had done push-ups. He had tossed and turned in the huge bed. He doubted he had slept more than an hour when Tark woke him.

Eyes burning, mouth nasty, Jason got up and did several stretching exercises. Then he began pitching billiard balls at folded fur comforters propped against the wall until his arm felt limber. An errant throw shattered an ornate jade vase and sent flowers flying.

Not long afterward a knock came at the door. It was Count Dershan, clad in a dapper uniform.

Jason and Tark followed him downstairs. They brought their belongings so they could leave when the duel was over. They proceeded directly to the billiard room. A crowd of guests and servants stood outside the doors. The crowd parted to let the participants pass.

Jason noticed several people giving him encouraging looks. Was he really about to fight someone to the death? He had no choice! Conrad had forced the issue. The Word was worthless if he remained trapped in Harthenham his whole life. Maldor would never be stopped, and he would never get home.

Once they entered the room, Dershan closed the doors, shutting out the onlookers. Inside, Duke Conrad awaited, medals glinting on his uniform. The onyx billiard table had sixty balls spaced equally across its maroon felt surface.

“We have our witnesses,” Conrad said. In response to a gesture Dershan and Tark took their places against a far wall. “You are more familiar with this form of combat than I am. How do we begin?”

Jason flexed his fingers. He had been thinking about the reality that he might die. Conrad was an athletic man. Luck would play a large role in this showdown. Jason tried to remind himself that he could throw fastballs at over eighty miles per hour. Without training, nobody could throw that fast. This was not a hopeless contest like fencing. Despite the danger, he had a real chance of



winning. “We stand at opposite ends of the table, no balls in our hands, and your man drops a handkerchief. When the handkerchief lands, we take up balls and throw them at will.”

Conrad nodded as if this met his expectations. “Shall we, then?” he asked, as if they were about to begin a game of checkers.

One thing Jason had to give Duke Conrad—he showed absolutely no fear. His nonchalance was unnerving.

Conrad and Jason took their places. Conrad stared coldly. Jason knew Conrad would kill him given the chance. But Jason hoped to end the contest without anybody dying. If he could hurt Conrad enough to get the upper hand, hopefully the duke would yield.

Jason felt sweaty. He rubbed his palms against his trousers. This was a different kind of nervous anticipation than he had ever experienced. No points would be tallied today. If he threw well he would live. If not, he would die. A strange tension hummed in his mind and body. His senses were in overdrive. The uneasiness he had sometimes felt before a ball game seemed ridiculous by contrast.

Dershan held a handkerchief aloft and let it fall. Jason hastily grabbed a ball in each hand. As a pitcher he had hit a batter once or twice, but now he would be trying to inflict serious injuries. Plus the batter would be throwing back.

As Jason released his first ball, Conrad’s first ball breezed past his ear. Conrad twisted in an attempt to avoid Jason’s first throw, but the ball struck him solidly, high in the back. Jason shifted the second ball to his right hand. It missed Conrad when he ducked. Jason lunged sideways in an attempt to dodge Conrad’s next throw, which glanced off his side, stinging but not stunning him. Jason hurriedly grasped for more balls.

In order to hamper Conrad’s ability to throw, Jason had hoped to bombard his arms, but in the heat of the moment it was difficult to aim with any precision. In unison they threw their next balls. Conrad’s went wild, missing by a few feet. Jason’s tagged the duke squarely on the collarbone. Jason threw another and barely missed the duke’s elbow. Conrad’s next throw was made awkward by his injury, but the ball hit Jason on the forearm, hurting plenty.

Jason snatched two more balls. Conrad fumbled as he reached for more. Jason remembered a trick he had used during water balloon fights. With his left hand he lobbed a yellow ball underhand fairly hard. It glanced off the high ceiling on its way toward Conrad, whose eyes followed it while he grasped for balls. Before

the first ball fell, Jason whipped the second ball sidearm as hard as he could. It caromed off Conrad's head, and the duke flopped to the floor.

Jason gasped. He had been aiming for the duke's throwing arm, but Conrad had ducked right into the path of the throw. The ball had connected with so much force that Jason paused for a moment, grimacing in empathy. Tark noisily cleared his throat, and Jason hastily grabbed two more balls, holding them ready.

Except for his chest rising and falling, Conrad lay motionless.

Breathing hard, his arm and side stinging, Jason remained poised to throw. The duke stayed on the floor. Was he really unconscious? Could the duel be over?

Jason glanced at Dershan. "Is that good enough?"

Count Dershan looked pale. "Duke Conrad asked for no quarter. It is your right to ensure his demise."

Jason wondered if Count Dershan coveted Conrad's job. "I think I'll take my chances. I was forced into this duel. I don't want to kill Duke Conrad. What happens to him now is no longer any of my business."

"As you wish," Dershan acquiesced.

"Let's get out of here," Jason said shakily, sickened by the brutality but relieved to be standing and relatively uninjured.

"Right," Tark grunted. "I've had my fill of Harthenham."

"Farewell," Dershan said. "I'll have the drawbridge opened. You comprehend that your asylum ends once you pass without the castle walls."

"It doesn't surprise me," Jason said.

He and Tark exited the billiard room. The crowd stared silently. Someone coughed.

"Any who want to join us are welcome," Jason said. "You may not get another chance like this. Fair warning: Once outside the castle walls, we will probably be attacked."

Everyone in the crowd found something to look at besides Jason. Except for a tall, heavyset man, his reddish-brown hair thinning on top. A longsword was strapped over his shoulder. "I'll come." Considering his size, his voice was pitched higher than Jason would have expected.

Jason had never particularly noticed the man. "We leave immediately."

The big man hoisted a pack. "I am Tristan, son of Jarom. Once I held a noble title, though I forfeited it long ago."

"Lord Jason of Caberton," Jason said. "And Tark."

“Of the Giddy Nine,” Tark explained.  
Jason nodded. “Let’s go.”

# ESCAPE

Jason, Tark, and Tristan hurried to the front door, trailed by the crowd of bystanders. A pair of male servants flanked the door, standing at attention. The servants made no move to impede their departure. Once outside, Tristan drew his sword, and Tark produced his heavy knife. Jason unintentionally still clutched a billiard ball.

“Hold,” called a voice behind them. They turned. Drake came striding down the hall, wearing a long, plain coat and tall boots. His hair was tied up in a ponytail, and a sword was fastened around his waist. “I need to come with you.”

Jason smiled. “Please, join us.” His eyes swept the onlookers. “Anyone else? Last call.” A short, slim man with a narrow face met his gaze. Frowning slightly, he shook his head. Nobody else would look him in the eyes.

The four men trotted out under the portico, across the courtyard, and through the front gate over the lowered drawbridge. They abandoned the lane leading away from the castle and struck off at a loping pace across a field of alfalfa. The morning was cool. Low clouds hung in the sky. Dew from the alfalfa stalks dampened their trousers.

“What made you join us?” Jason asked Tristan.

“I was never proud of my decision to come here,” Tristan panted. “Seeing men with the courage to defy Duke Conrad and forgo the protection of the castle inspired me. I resolved yesterday that if you won your duel, I would go with you.”

“Glad to have you,” Jason said, a little worried that Tristan was getting out of breath so soon.

“You realize we are about to die,” Drake said.

“Probably,” Tristan agreed. “But this is a better way to go.”

Jason kept silent.

From behind, dogs began baying in an exuberant chorus. The four men looked back and saw nearly twenty eager mastiffs and boarhounds tearing after them, followed by a horseman.

“They don’t waste much time,” Jason muttered bitterly.

The four men broke into a sprint. Tristan discarded his pack. On the far side of the alfalfa field they vaulted a low wooden fence. Tark caught his foot on a post and went down hard, scrambling back up with the adrenalized vigor of a man about to become dog chow. The next field was a wide expanse of knee-high grass. Jason glanced back. The pack of fierce canines was already halfway across the alfalfa field. The man on horseback was now visible as Kimp, cantering along easily behind the dogs, a flanged mace in one hand.

Already Tristan was breathing in ragged gasps, his face red and sweat-glossed. His pace was beginning to flag. Jason slowed his pace to stay with him. Tristan angrily motioned him forward. “Go on,” he wheezed.

Drake had the lead. Tark raced with remarkable speed for such a compact man. Jason could barely keep up with them. He concentrated on his feet beating against the grassy ground, trying to lengthen his stride and make his legs pump faster. The yowling of the pursuing dogs was rising in intensity.

Jason already felt a stitch forming in his side, like a screw twisting inward. He rubbed at it. Tark was a couple of steps ahead, his short legs churning desperately.

Glancing back, Jason saw that Tristan had turned to face the approaching dogs, longsword clutched in two hands. The dogs were almost upon him.

Jason witnessed Tristan’s last stand in a strobe of backward glances.

Tristan slashing a leaping mastiff.

Tristan down on one knee, hacking at a boarhound, whines now mingling with the vigorous baying.

Tristan fighting to his feet, fists swinging wildly.

Tristan on the ground with dogs swarmed around him, gutting a mastiff with a dagger as a boarhound found his throat.

Jason stumbled and went sprawling on the dewy grass.

Tark skidded to a halt and yanked him up.

A dozen dogs still pursued them. Jason had dropped the billiard ball in the fall. The only weapon he now bore was his poniard. Tark had his knife. Several paces ahead Drake held his sword.

Out of a grove of trees on one side of the field came Jasher on a splendid black charger, riding straight toward Jason and Tark. He was leading a gray horse.

“Prongs!” shouted Tark, swerving to the left.

“No! He’s a friend!”

Jasher raised a crossbow. He fired a quarrel. It was a long shot to the dogs. Jason glanced back. A boarhound pitched forward, a shaft protruding from its chest.

Jasher discarded the crossbow and produced another one. A mastiff fell. The crossbow went into the grass, replaced by another. Another mastiff went down with a yelp.

Jasher was almost upon Jason and Tark as he produced a fourth crossbow. "Take the horse," he ordered, releasing the reins.

The freed horse thundered straight at Jason. How was he supposed to stop a speeding horse? He dove out of the way, reaching back halfheartedly for the loose reins. He missed the reins, and the horse raced past, gradually slowing.

Jasher leveled his crossbow and shot another boarhound.

"Turn and fight!" Drake called. He flung a short sword end over end. The blade stuck in the ground at Jason's feet, and he seized it.

Jason and Tark whirled to face the remaining dogs. With a fifth crossbow Jasher reduced the dogs to seven as he bolted past them to intercept Kimp.

Drake trotted away from Tark and Jason, creating some space. Brandishing his sword, he shouted at the onrushing canines. Four of the dogs veered after him.

Three dogs—two boarhounds and a mastiff—charged at Jason and Tark. Jason sidestepped the leap of the mastiff, slashing its head as it soared past. A bounding boarhound rammed Tark into a backward somersault, taking his heavy knife through the chest in the process. The second boarhound came at Jason low, sweeping his legs out from under him with its rushing bulk.

The boarhound tore at the leg of Jason's pants, teeth penetrating to the flesh. Suddenly the mastiff he had slashed was upon him as well, going for his throat. Jason gave it his forearm instead. He had dropped the short sword. With his free hand he desperately pushed against the writhing bulk of the ferocious canine.

The boarhound was no longer savaging Jason's leg. Then Tark tackled the mastiff. Arm pistoning frantically, Tark stabbed the dog repeatedly, until it went limp.

Sitting up, Jason observed that the boarhound at his feet had also been dispatched by Tark. Off to one side, untouched, Drake stood calmly with a bloody sword in hand, surrounded by four dead dogs. Turning his head, Jason saw Jasher and Kimp closing on each other. Jasher held his doubled chain. Kimp brandished his flanged mace. Both horses galloped wildly.

As they reached each other, Kimp sprang from the saddle, straight at Jasher. Jasher swung his chain, but it was too late—Kimp collided with him, and both men flew off the back of Jasher's horse to roll in the grass.

Both men arose immediately. Kimp used his free hand to intercept Jasher's chain on its way to his tattooed head, while simultaneously swinging his club with a quick, one-handed backhand that struck Jasher in the chest.

The hasty blow from the mace was not particularly forceful, but it was accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. There came a brief glare of intense light, and then Jasher blew apart in a roaring explosion that hurled Kimp backward in fiery ruin.

Jason gaped in disbelief. Some distance away a flock of birds took flight. Smoke mushroomed up from the blast. Kimp lay motionless, his clothes aflame. Just like that both men were destroyed.

"Jasher was a seed person," Jason gasped, sprinting toward the fallen warriors. Tark followed.

"His seed pops out when he dies," Jason told Tark. "If we find his amar, we can save him."

"Be quick," Drake warned, scanning the surrounding area as he hurried to join them. "Others will come after us. We're losing our chance to flee."

Jason found Jasher's scorched head and neck still attached to part of his torso, lying face up, long hair matted in charred tangles. Jason turned the remnant of his former protector facedown and checked beneath the roll of hair at the nape of his neck. He found an empty socket.

"The seed got out," Jason said, on the verge of tears. "Search the grass!"

The three of them fanned out, combing carefully through the knee-high grass.

"Maybe it was destroyed," Tark said.

"No," Jason said, refusing to consider the possibility. "He saved us. We're going to find it."

"The amar is normally quite durable," Drake muttered, studying the ground.

The circle of their search continued to widen. Jason periodically looked back toward the castle for evidence of additional pursuit.

Tark returned to where Jasher's head lay, and squatted, searching meticulously. A moment later he held up the gray, walnut-sized seed. "We missed it. The seed was half buried. It must have detached while he was lying there, before you flipped him over."

Jason sighed with relief. "We have to plant it in a safe, fertile spot."

“Far from here,” Drake said.

Tark nodded, slipping the seed into a pouch on his belt.

One of the horses, the black one Jasher had ridden, remained close by. Kimp’s steed had started grazing over a hundred yards away. The gray horse Jasher had led had run off a good distance across the field. It began grazing as well.

“I’ll bring the gray horse back,” Tark said, mounting Jasher’s horse.

“I’ll get Kimp’s mount,” Drake called over his shoulder, already running toward the stallion.

Jason looked around. Where was Rachel? Jasher must have insisted she hang back.

The gray horse shied away from Tark when he got close, but Tark rode it down and caught hold of the reins.

Blood trickled down Jason’s arm to his hand as he watched Drake mount Kimp’s horse. Jason hesitantly inspected his wound. His sleeve was tattered above ugly tears and punctures in his skin. Maybe he could cut a strip of material from his cloak and fashion a bandage.

Tark was waving an arm, pointing in Jason’s direction. Jason turned around. No less than twenty horsemen were emerging from the trees behind him at full gallop. These were not reinforcements from the castle. They came from off to one side.

Drake sat astride his horse, sword in hand, frowning. Behind Drake, across the field, Jason saw Rachel emerge from the edge of the woods on horseback. Tark was returning for Jason, the gray horse in tow. Neither Tark nor Drake could possibly make it in time. Jason waved them away. “Go, go, go!” he shouted. “Drake, save Rachel! Tark, tell her ‘rim’! Tell her ‘rim’! Go!”

Saluting with his sword and spurring his mount, Drake rode away from the soldiers. His horse jumped a fence and galloped madly up a gentle slope toward where Rachel waited.

Tark reined in his horse, hesitating.

“Get out of here!” Jason yelled. “‘Rim’!”

Tark released the gray horse and took off, veering away from Drake.

Jason turned to face the riders. With no recourse he raised his hands in surrender. Most drew up around him. Four went after Tark. Five others chased Drake and Rachel.

Several lightly armored men dismounted, seizing Jason roughly. These were not conscriptors—or if they were, they wore less impressive armor than the ones



who had previously tried to capture him. Their helmets had no face guards. They searched him and relieved him of his poniard.

“Lord Jason of Caberton, I presume?” asked a man still seated on horseback, apparently the commander.

“Yes.” Jason felt defiant. He was captured, his friends were on the run, and he had little to lose. “How’d you know?”

“We were warned early this morning of your possible defection. A recent signal confirmed your decision. Is this the seedman Jasher?” The commander indicated the charred remains.

“It’s his identical twin.”

“We know he traveled with you until recently. Where is his amar?”

“I ate it.”

“This is a foolish time for flippancy.”

“I panicked. It tasted horrible. Do you have any mouthwash?”

“Search the vicinity,” the commander ordered his men. “And check the young lord thoroughly.”

They methodically searched Jason and his clothes. Crouching soldiers scoured the surrounding area with painstaking care. “The amar is not here, sir,” a soldier finally reported.

“Search again,” the commander directed. “There can be no error. And bind the prisoner’s wounds.”

A stinging salve was applied to Jason’s torn arm and leg, after which they were wound with linen bandages. Nobody found a seed.

“One of the other men has it, then,” the commander concluded. “They should be apprehended by now.”

“Your men won’t be back,” Jason said. “Do you know the kind of people who live at Harthenham? I’m not talking about the fat ones. I’m talking about the sort who kill guys like you as a hobby.”

“Enough nonsense.”

Several minutes later a lone rider returned, his horse lathered.

“The man who went north rides Kimp’s stallion, Mandibar. The girl had an excellent mount as well. The horses were too fast. The others remain in pursuit, but unless they make a mistake, our only chance lies in anticipating a destination and heading them off.”

The commander scratched his cheek. “Where was he going?” he asked Jason.

“How should I know? He was running away.”

“Tell me about your friends.”

“I hardly knew them. The one who ran off with the girl is named Christopher Columbus. Tall guy. Really skinny. Green hair. Fangs. Six fingers on his left hand. About a hundred years old. Lots of wrinkles.”

“I trust you are enjoying yourself,” the commander sneered. “You are currently protected by orders to inflict no unnecessary harm. Otherwise I would teach you to guard your tongue. Your impudence will not go unpunished for long.” He turned to his men. “Edmund—go to Harthenham and ascertain who we are pursuing. Bradford—take two men to Orin and find the pair who fled north. Cecil, take two men and track the man Eric pursued to the west. The rest of us are off to Felrook.”

# THE WORD

*A-rim-fex-en-dra-puse. Arimfexendrapuse.* The stupidest word Jason could have imagined. Utter nonsense. Supposedly it would unmake Maldor. He repeated the odd syllables in his mind, varying the inflection. If it failed, he could always try “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”

For the past several days Jason had ridden east, under the watchful eye of Ian, the commander who had captured him. Six other heavily armed guards rode along as escorts. Ian had promised that before sunset today Jason would behold Felrook.

Throughout the journey Ian had remained tight-lipped about what specifically would happen to Jason. The commander gave ample hints that it would be unpleasant but offered no particulars. Jason hoped they would bring him before Maldor. Since the emperor should not suspect Jason had the entire Word, getting captured could turn into the perfect opportunity to finish his quest.

If he succeeded in destroying the emperor, Jason knew he might face immediate execution. But he was already facing torture or death in the dungeons of Felrook. How great would it be to take down the emperor instead! He thought about the joy it would bring to Rachel, Galloran, Jasher, Tark, Nicholas, and all of the others who had helped him. He had already beaten the odds by surviving as long as he had. Maybe he would find a way to survive after defeating Maldor.

Still, he couldn't keep a variety of fears from haunting him. What if they planned to brainwash the syllables out of his memory before bringing him before Maldor, to minimize the risk? Galloran was evidence that such precautions were within their power. What if they opted to never even bring him before Maldor? Or what if they gagged him?

With the sun approaching the horizon, Jason and his captors came through a narrow pass. A large valley spread out before them to the north, with Felrook in

the distance. Jason did not know what exactly he had expected, but the reality surpassed anything he had anticipated.

A monstrous stronghold of iron and stone, the huge castle surmounted a tall island of rock in the center of a sprawling lake. The sheer cliffs of the island rose to great heights above the water, augmented by the monumental outer wall of the fortress. Four lesser rock formations surrounded the central island. Atop these satellite islands perched smaller fortresses, the two largest connected to the central stronghold by stone bridges, the other two by suspended walkways.

Further fortifying the intimidating complex, the ferry granting access to Felrook was encompassed by a formidable wall of its own. Three hills loomed near the lake, each crowned with a mighty keep, from which reserve forces could sally to harass assailing armies. Without atomic bombs or high explosives Jason could not conceive how Felrook could ever fall.

“Has Felrook ever been taken?” Jason asked Ian.

Ian snorted. “Felrook has never been attacked.”

Jason could believe it.

“Are we going to make it there tonight?” Jason asked.

“You have one last night to contemplate your fate,” Ian replied. “We’ll camp not far from here, then deliver you late tomorrow morning. I hope you’re ready to answer for your crimes. You cannot imagine the horrors that await.”

“Will I go to the dungeon?” Jason asked.

“You will answer for your behavior,” Ian promised cryptically.

Jason said nothing more as they rode forward and set up camp. After eating, all but two guards bedded down. Hands bound in front of him, Jason rested on his side. He had already tried to run off one night, earning a lump on the back of his head and a black eye. Jason knew it was futile to attempt another escape. All of his hopes were now focused on earning an opportunity to stand before the emperor.

Despite the long day riding, Jason found sleep elusive. He could not ignore that this was probably the final night of his life. His parents would never see him again, nor would his brother and sister. He would never see Matt or Tim. He would never play with Shadow. None of them would ever know what really happened.

When he finally slept, frustrating visions troubled him. He dreamed of his teeth falling out, of arriving for exams unprepared, and of searching for his parents in a chaotic crowd.

Until Drake shook him awake. "You're the heaviest sleeper of the bunch," the seedman chuckled.

Jason sat up, disoriented, hands unbound. The fire had burned low. He could see the figures of the soldiers sleeping around him.

"Keep your voice down," Jason whispered urgently.

Drake grinned. "They can't hear us anymore."

"You mean . . ."

"The only tricky part was the sentries," Drake said. "And they weren't much of a challenge."

Jason could hardly believe his ears. He looked around. "Who came with you?"

"I delivered Rachel to Tark and sent them northward," Drake said. "I've been stalking your little caravan for days. I figured we might as well let them bring you most of the way."

"You know about the Word?" Jason asked.

"Rachel filled me in," Drake said. "Tark gave her the last syllable. The second, correct?"

"Yes."

Drake rubbed the back of his neck. "I can hardly believe somebody finally pieced it all together. Rachel wanted to come. She tried to insist. But I reminded her that if you failed, she would become our last hope. Besides, I knew that alone I could successfully slip past our enemies and track you. Another person would have made the outcome less certain."

"If I fail," Jason said, "Rachel should share the syllables with someone else."

"I'll keep that in mind," Drake said. "But you won't fail, not if you have the syllables right."

"You know how to get me in front of Maldor?" Jason asked.

"I do," Drake replied. "Might be a one-way trip, and you'll have to go alone, but I know how. Are you willing?"

The question made Jason pause. Drake had rescued him. They could run away. "Will there ever be a better opportunity?" Jason asked.

"To get in front of Maldor?" Drake verified. "The emperor no longer leaves Felrook. The only sure way to gain an audience with him is to ring the gong near the gate to the ferry. By imperial decree anyone can ring it and talk to the emperor. In practice nobody ever touches it. Guards protect it, and everyone understands that while ringing the gong guarantees an audience with Maldor, it provides no assurances regarding the consequences of that audience."

“So what do we do?” Jason asked.

“We leave now,” Drake said. “We get to the ferry before sunrise. I’ll create an opportunity, and you’ll ring the gong.”

Jason realized that unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life running from agents of the emperor, he had to finish this. Drake seemed committed and able. Here was a real chance to succeed where so many others had failed. If the gong would grant an audience with Maldor, he could fulfill his mission and maybe move on with his life.

“Let’s go,” Jason said.

\* \* \*

Outside the wall protecting the ferry was a town considerably bigger than it had looked from afar. Drake and Jason rode into town before sunrise, both wearing clothing and armor taken from the fallen soldiers. Drake carried a bow and a quiver of twelve arrows. Jason had recovered his poniard, along with a regular sword and a crossbow. They passed numerous stables, several warehouses, various inns, diverse shops, and multiple garrisons.

After tying up their horses, Drake led Jason down a series of alleyways. From the shadowy shelter of an alley Drake indicated a roofed platform accessible by stairs on three sides. Sheltered by the roof, hardly visible despite the burning cressets nearby, the round shape of a large gong dangled from a crossbeam. Beside it hung a mallet on a chain. Jason counted four guards.

“I’ll climb onto the roof of that building across the street,” Drake said. “You’ll make your way to that shed over there.” He pointed.

“I see it,” Jason said.

“I’ll make my presence known by loosing arrows. Once I get started, you run for the gong and ring it loudly. I’ll ensure you get there.”

“What will you do afterward?” Jason asked.

“Try to get away,” Drake said. “My chances are poor. But as long as you ring that gong, and then say the Word when the time comes, it will be well worth the sacrifice. I’ve been waiting for this, Jason. I’m not sure I knew I was waiting, but I was. We should move before it gets any lighter. Ready?”

“Okay.”

Drake strolled across the street. Following his example, Jason wandered casually down the road to the shed. From the shed he would be able to approach the platform from the side while Drake shot arrows at the front.

Once he reached the shed, Jason kept out of view from the gong guards while watching the roof. Just as he was wondering why Drake was taking so long, he heard a strangled cry, and a guard toppled down the platform steps.

Jason broke from cover and rushed toward the platform. Guards were shouting and motioning at the roof, then dropping with arrows in them. Another pair of guards issued from a small building on the far side of the platform.

As Jason reached the base of the steps leading up to the gong, only one guard remained on the platform. He had taken cover behind a thick post holding up the roof. When he saw Jason charging up the steps, he emerged from his position, sword in hand, and an arrow instantly pierced his side.

Lunging up the steps two at a time, Jason reached the mallet, grabbed the handle, and smashed the head into the gong like he was swinging a baseball bat. The long, shimmering crash hurt his ears, but he wailed the gong again, and again, figuring the more times he hit it, the less room there would be for argument.

“Enough!” called a guard, one of the two who had emerged from the guardhouse, and the only one without an arrow in him. He stood at the foot of the steps in front of the platform.

“I wanted to make sure,” Jason explained, wondering if Drake might still shoot the final guard.

“You’ll get your audience,” the guard assured him. He turned toward the roof where Drake hid. “He’ll get his audience,” he yelled. Then he looked up at Jason. “You may not like what happens afterward, but you’ll come before the emperor. Can I get your name?”

“Lord Jason of Caberton.”

The guard huffed. “Should have known. Word has gotten out about you. I thought you were captured after fleeing Harthenham?”

“So did my captors,” Jason said mysteriously.

“You’re just a lad,” the man realized, coming up the steps, hands raised. “Well, it was a bold run. I hope you can handle facing the end of it.”

“Me too,” Jason said honestly.

“I’ll have to relieve you of your weapons,” the guard said.

“How do I know I’ll get to see the emperor?” Jason asked.

“At this hour all of Felrook heard that gong,” the guard said. “They all know the rules.”

Jason handed over his sword.

\* \* \*

Perhaps an hour later, with the sun poised to rise, Jason and the gong guard boarded a ferry. It could have held a hundred men, but they were the only passengers. They crossed the lake to a quay projecting from a small landing area at the base of the central island. The fortress loomed above them, seeming to stretch upward forever. A switchback path had been carved into the face of the precipice. As Jason marched up the path behind the gong guard, several other guards fell into step behind them.

Jason imagined at least some of the guards might have bragged if they had apprehended Drake. He hoped their silence meant the seedman had managed to slip away.

As he climbed the path, the Word burned in Jason's mind. What if one of the syllables was wrong? Did pronunciation matter? He wished he could practice saying the Word aloud, but supposedly, once he uttered it, the Word would vanish from his memory. He would have to wait.

After the long ascent they passed through the two tremendous gates of the thick outer wall, walking under several massive raised portcullises, only to discover an inner wall nearly as high as the first. Nothing in the fortress was beautiful—everything existed to repulse and intimidate attackers. Riddled with loopholes and trapdoors, the battlements projected over the walls, making them virtually impossible to scale. Heavily armed guards patrolled everywhere, some accompanied by manglers. Catapults and trebuchets stood ready to help repel invaders. The main building was a blocky structure, warded by a series of parapets that receded from the courtyard in a progression of crenellated terraces.

Across the courtyard and into the stronghold they strode, down bare, solid hallways and up broad stairways, until they stood outside a massive pair of black iron doors, each embossed with a grinning skull.

A tall man, dressed like a conscriptor, instructed Jason's other escorts to depart. After they moved away, the conscriptor thoroughly searched Jason, finding no new weapons since the others had already all been confiscated. Then he pulled twice on a chain dangling from a hole in the wall. The doors swung open. "Lord Jason of Caberton," the tall conscriptor proclaimed.

Clenching his jaw, the Key Word repeating in his mind, Jason entered the vast audience hall. Huge pillars supported the roof, their bases carved like human feet, their tops shaped like hands splayed against the ceiling. Torches blazed in sconces on the walls. Flames leaped up from kettle-shaped braziers standing about the room on cabriole legs. A long black carpet led to an obsidian



dais, where a man clad in a sable cloak sat upon a dark throne bristling with spikes. Off to the sides courtiers milled about, all eyes on Jason.

Starting at the base of the dais, on either side of the black carpet, ran long tables draped in black silk. At the tables sat many men and a few women. Most had empty eye sockets and only one ear. Many were missing limbs. Those who could see regarded Jason solemnly.

The tall conscriptor ushered Jason to a position ten yards from the dais, between the black tables, then backed away. The man on the throne had white hair and hard gray eyes. He was clean-shaven, with handsomely chiseled features and a cleft in his chin. A steel pendant featuring a huge black gem hung over his chest.

He sat with an elbow propped on an armrest, a single finger resting against the side of his head. He wore a bemused expression. "Greetings, Lord Jason." He spoke in a melodious baritone.

Jason felt like everyone expected him to kneel and beg. "Are you Maldor?"

Maldor chuckled. As if this granted permission, low laughter rippled through the room. "I am. Why have you sought audience with me?"

"I want to have a word with you," Jason said. "Just one." Maldor leaned slightly forward, eyes sharpening with alarm and disbelief.

Jason wondered what would happen after he said the Word. He was deep inside the fortress. Escape would be highly unlikely.

"Arimfexendrapuse!" Jason shouted.

Jason could feel the energy of the word as he spoke it. For an instant he almost sensed the meaning. The utterance left a buzzing aftertaste in his mouth.

Maldor gazed at him questioningly. Around the room courtiers murmured.

With a jolt of panic Jason realized he must have mispronounced the word. But when he tried to say it again, he could not remember how it started. Or how it ended. Or what came in the middle.

He strained his mind. He remembered *The Book of Salzared*. He remembered Jugard and the crab. He remembered the lorevault, and Whitelake, and the Sunken Lands, and Kimp. But the syllables were gone.

Calm had returned to Maldor. He folded his hands in his lap. "Anything else?"

"That was all," Jason replied uncomfortably. What else could he say?

"How unfortunate that the one word you wished to share with me was gibberish," Maldor said, bewildered. "You are dismissed."

Jason's mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

“Groddic,” Maldor said. “Take this confused youngster to a holding chamber until I select a punishment.”

The tall conscriptor bowed deeply, seized Jason by the arm, and guided him from the room out a side door. Jason glanced back over his shoulder at Maldor, who returned the gaze with puzzlement.

Groddic led Jason along a hall, then down a cramped, winding staircase to a corridor lined with iron doors. The three soldiers manning the small antechamber at the front of the corridor came to attention and saluted.

“I need a holding cell for this one,” the tall conscriptor said.

One of the soldiers produced a key ring and opened a door on the left side of the hall. Groddic manhandled Jason into the room, which was bare except for an iron chair bolted to the floor.

“Secure him,” Groddic said.

Jason saw no use in resisting. What could he expect to do, run wild through the fortress, find a way out, swim the lake, and escape into the wilderness? Still, he pushed off one of the soldiers and lunged for the door. A large hand caught him by the back of the neck and flung him brusquely to the floor. From a supine position Jason looked up at Groddic, who had so easily thwarted his escape. The tall man glowered.

“Sit in the chair.”

Two of the soldiers had swords drawn. Jason went and sat in the hard chair. One soldier approached and began fastening him in. There were manacles on the armrests for his wrists, manacles on the legs for his ankles, and an iron collar affixed to the high back of the chair that clamped around his neck. The soldiers secured straps around his chest, thighs, and upper arms.

Groddic and the soldiers departed without a backward glance. A feeble ribbon of light glimmered into the room from under the door.

Jason had no way to measure time.

The confining straps and manacles allowed him virtually no room to even squirm. The iron collar was so snug he could feel every pulse of blood through his carotid artery. The darkness and confinement made him begin to feel claustrophobic. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly, tried to pretend he was strapped to the chair by choice and could release himself at will.

He could not believe the Word had failed. He had gone through so much to obtain it! It would be one thing if absolutely nothing had happened. But the Word had felt powerful as he'd spoken it, and it had erased itself from his

memory, which meant the syllables had probably been correct, and he had pronounced it just fine.

Maldor had not burst into flames. He had not melted into a bubbling jelly of biomaterial. He had not vanished with a thunderclap, empty clothes falling to the floor. The ground had not rumbled, the castle had not tumbled to ruins, and the courtiers had not fled the room in terror.

Instead Jason had been the focus of an awkward moment for less than a minute and then unceremoniously escorted from the room. Now he sat chained to a chair.

What if the Word worked slowly? What if the effects took time to manifest? Hours, days, weeks? It didn't seem likely. Magical or not, the Word had been a dud.

Jason sighed. He kept trying to ignore the restraints.

He tried counting heartbeats but gave up when he reached a thousand.

He imagined happier times. He pictured his dad drilling a tooth. He envisioned his mom walking Shadow. He imagined Matt turning in an English assignment. He visualized Tim cracking jokes at lunch, getting the whole table laughing.

Then he pictured Rachel. She was on the run with Tark someplace. He found that he missed her more than anyone, perhaps because he knew the others were safe. What would become of her? Somebody needed to warn her that the Word was a dud.

Hours passed. His mouth became dry. His stomach gurgled. He pictured himself dining during his arrival banquet at Harthenham.

How long would they keep him here? Besides being hungry and thirsty, he was developing an itch beside his nose. He attempted to reach it with his tongue but could not come close. Eventually he quit trying.

Much later—it was impossible to determine exactly how long—the door opened, bringing blinding light. Jason squinted while his eyes adjusted.

A pair of men carried a table into the cell. A third brought a cushioned chair. The two men spread a clean white cloth over the table and placed a bottle in a silver bucket of ice beside a glass. The other man set a lantern on the corner of the table.

“At least this place has room service,” Jason said, his voice cracking. His mouth was dry. He had not spoken for hours.

The men did not acknowledge his comment or his presence. They exited the room and closed the door.

Not long after they had departed, the door opened again.

Maldor entered unaccompanied.

The door closed behind him.

“Greetings, Jason,” he said, sitting in the chair at the table.

Jason swallowed. The pulse in his neck quickened.

“You are in a difficult situation,” Maldor said, pulling the bottle from the bucket and wiping off the beads of moisture with a linen napkin.

“I have an itch by my nose. It’s beginning to fade though.”

Maldor set the napkin aside. “Oklinder, with a hint of lumba berries.” He uncorked the bottle. “Let us speak plainly, man to man.”

“Sounds good.”

“Congratulations.” Maldor poured pink liquid into the glass and raised it toward Jason. “You have uttered the dreaded Key Word in my presence. You surprised me. I would not have chosen to let you speak the Word in public. I did not realize you had all of the syllables. Those who heard it will not remember it, but still, I dislike being surprised. Although you were not rewarded with the desired effect, you had the Word right.”

Jason stared blankly. “I did? Then what happened?”

Maldor gave a small smile. “You tell me.”

Jason frowned. “The Word was a hoax?”

“Perceptive.”

“A big diversion,” Jason realized.

“What value does the Word have as a diversion?” Maldor coaxed, taking a sip.

Jason’s heart sank. “It would keep your enemies busy, chasing after false hope.”

Maldor inclined his head in agreement. “You have the idea. Only myself and Salzared know the truth. And now you.”

“Salzared was in on it?” Jason felt dizzy. The faceless hero who had stolen the Word was a fraud!

“The displacer Salzared lives a life of pampered luxury inside this stronghold. It is his skin that binds the book scribbled in his blood, his eye on the cover.”

“What about the people guarding the syllables?”

Maldor waved a dismissive hand. “Everyone else who knows of the Word believes it is real. Those who guard the syllables believe they reside in magical refuges beyond my reach. They are very well protected, but were the Word an

authentic way to destroy me, I would have found a way to eliminate at least one of them long ago.”

Jason studied Maldor. “How did the Word vanish from my mind after I said it?”

“You said a true key word,” Maldor explained. “It was the word that could obliterate a past enemy of mine, a fellow student of Zokar named Orruck. That was why the Word and its syllables could withstand scrutiny even from the wise. The word you spoke and forgot is indeed capable of undoing a wizard. But not me.”

“Did you use it to destroy Orruck?”

“I held the Word in reserve but never had occasion to use it, until I employed it as decoy to divert the efforts of some of my staunchest adversaries. Amazing what even intelligent men will accept as truth when they desperately want to believe it.”

Jason scowled in silence. Could it really be true? So much effort all for nothing? So many people placing their hopes on a falsehood? He felt shattered to his core. With Maldor as an enemy no wonder so many had given up hope.

“Why are you telling me this?” Jason asked. “Is this just another trick?”

“I’ll be interested to learn how you obtained all of the syllables,” Maldor said. “By my count you had four: the original syllable from the Repository of Learning, the syllable guarded by Jugard in the cave, the syllable held by Malar on Whitelake, and the syllable protected by the Pythoness in the Sunken Lands. You never visited the Temple of Mianamon, nor did you set sail to the Isle of Weir. I suspect the hand of Galloran in this, but how he concealed these syllables from me is perplexing. Perhaps he was not as thoroughly broken as my tormentors assured me.”

“Maybe I’m psychic,” Jason said.

“That could be tested,” Maldor said. “I’ll learn the truth from you. Not now, I expect, but soon enough.”

“Why are you telling me so much?” Jason asked.

Maldor swirled the fluid in his glass. “In private I only engage in candid conversations. I want you to comprehend your situation. Anything I tell you can be erased from your mind should that become necessary. Or I can simply have you executed.”

“You seem very powerful,” Jason said. “Why all the subtlety? Why the games?”

Maldor took a slow sip of oklinder juice. "I could crush the populace of every province I control, even if they rose united against me. But I enjoy experiments in governance, finding methods for holding power more securely, employing strategies to debase my opponents. No empire is ever too secure. I want mine to endure for millennia."

Jason licked his dry lips. "I still don't get why you're talking to me."

Maldor drank the remainder of the fluid in his glass. "Another purpose served by the hunt for the false Key Word is to identify my most capable adversaries. I take a keen interest in my opponents. Long ago I promised myself that any man who succeeded in obtaining the Word would receive the opportunity to join my elite circle."

"You want me to join you?"

"You have demonstrated your worthiness in many ways. You thwarted several attempts to capture and kill you. You overcame a variety of obstacles to gain the syllables. You eluded the titan crab. No others have done that. You bested Copernum in a battle of wits. Again, an exclusive accomplishment. Your friend crossed Whitelake, and you visited the Pythoness. Unbeknownst to me or my agents you obtained two syllables secretly. You found allies when necessary. Ferrin spoke highly of you. You are not eager to shed blood but will do so when cornered. You overcame Duke Conrad in a duel. You had enough self-possession to forgo the pleasures of Harthenham. You have proven yourself intelligent, brave, tenacious, resourceful. In short you are the type of man I prefer at my side rather than resisting me."

"Do you try to turn all your enemies to your side?"

"All of the most valiant ones."

"Then Galloran refused."

Maldor shrugged. "To Galloran, his stubborn ideologies were more important than wielding real power. Had he joined me, he could have regained his kingdom and accomplished most of his goals. Instead he chooses to grow old in a rotting keep. Incidentally, he was my only other adversary to obtain the entire Word. Truth be known, he said it to me in this very dungeon. Of course it had no effect except to erase the syllables from his mind. I convinced him that he uttered the Word to a decoy, to explain why it failed to destroy me. He had been recently blinded, so he had no reason to doubt me."

Jason furrowed his brow, his heart aching for Galloran. "Why toy so much with your enemies? Why not just kill them?"

“You keep asking *why*. Curiosity can be admirable, but yours is so lazy. Can’t you deduce the obvious answers? No, too late, I will divulge further unearned knowledge. ‘Toying with my enemies,’ as you phrase it, is simply another experiment in statecraft. Murder begets murder. I want the world to fear me, without inflaming that fear into rebellion. I slay many inconsequential enemies. But slaying powerful enemies creates martyrs, rallying their followers, allowing fear to become emboldened into anger. So I do not kill my most effective enemies. Great men who oppose Maldor know they will be ruined. Not killed, but utterly broken. They end their lives addicted to the pleasures of Harthenham, or, after long imprisonment and extensive conditioning, they are released into the world as feeble shadows of their former selves, burdened with physical and mental handicaps. Walking testaments to the futility of resisting my authority. Rather than spark rebellion, they are pitied and forgotten.”

“Unless they switch to your side,” Jason pointed out.

“Correct. And nothing is more demoralizing to my opposition than when their leaders join me.” Maldor poured a little more juice into his glass. “My opponents have no heroes. Their best men and women either sell out or fail catastrophically.”

“Ruthless.”

“Only if you are foolish enough to oppose me. My power has never been seriously threatened, nor will it be.” He sipped some juice. “Often the most dangerous enemies are former allies. My potential enemies, within my ranks and without, are kept separated and monitored. In conquered provinces I establish competent leaders of limited vision who will never aspire to the absolute power I wield. Their highest aspirations are to find favor in my sight. Something you have already accomplished.” Maldor set down his glass.

Jason scowled thoughtfully. “If I joined you, how could you ever consider me a trustworthy servant? How would you know my loyalty was real?”

Maldor pursed his lips and placed his palms together. “Admirable. You have cut to the center of the issue. Your probable disloyalty is my chief concern in welcoming you into my inner circle of colleagues. The principal solution entails you receiving an eye and an ear from a displacer to replace your own, thereby rendering you incapable of secrecy. The temptation toward disloyalty would thus be removed.”

“Now I get why Galloran refused your offer to restore his sight.”

Maldor shrugged. “I could have forced a grafting upon him, but since it appealed to his sense of dignity to live out his life as an anonymous blind pauper

settling petty disputes in a ruined castle, I was willing to accommodate that desire.”

Maldor took up his glass and drained it. Jason shifted in his seat as much as the restraints permitted. “Those people at the tables by your throne are all displacers?” Jason asked.

“Better. A conjecture rather than a *why*. They are all displacers. They sacrificed body parts to serve as my intelligence network. I keep the most important ones close to me so I can receive significant tidings instantly. You are a Beyonder. Tell me why you came to this world.”

The request jarred Jason.

“Honestly, it was an accident. I worked in a zoo, where I fell into the hippopotamus tank, got swallowed, and came out of a tree beside a river.”

Maldor rose from his seat and walked over to Jason, looking down at him.

“A peculiar quirk of fate. Why did you elect to oppose me?”

Jason got the impression Maldor was very interested in this response.

“I read the book because I was curious. I knew it was forbidden, but I was hoping it might contain information about how to get home. Anyway, I read it, then met up with Galloran, who explained that my best chance to stay alive was to pursue the Word like the book said.”

“I believe you,” Maldor said. “Your tale fits the evidence, and I have a knack for spotting lies. Because your involvement against me was the result of unfortunate luck, I may show you mercy. But first tell me how you came to possess the second syllable. I know you never went near the Temple of Mianamon.”

Jason considered the request. Kimp was dead, so he was no longer protecting a valuable secret. Unless Maldor would exact revenge on Galloran for placing the tattoo. That was a huge breach of his rules and would probably get the Blind King in trouble.

“I can’t tell you. But honestly, nobody could ever discover the second syllable the way I got it.”

Maldor considered him for a long time. “Again I believe you. And I can interpret much from your answer. Galloran must have disregarded my rules. I will learn more of this later.” He began pacing back and forth before the chair.

“What now?”

Maldor stopped pacing and grinned. “Only men in your unfortunate situation are permitted to sit while I stand.”

Jason stared in silence.



“I have a fondness for Beyonders,” Maldor said. “I formally invite you to serve me. There is much I can offer. I will exalt you above the petty squabbles that trouble my lesser servants. You have proven you deserve to live beyond such nonsense. Using the secrets that extend my health and youth, I can prolong your mortal life to many times its normal duration. We will work together directly, until I find the best way to employ your talents. You will have to work hard, but will also enjoy many rewards. And you will retain a measure of freedom. You will be released immediately, and I will forgive all of your friends for any crimes involving you.”

Jason contemplated the trust Galloran had placed in him. He thought of Jasher sacrificing his life and Drake risking his final life at the gong. He pictured Tark and Rachel riding desperately to escape Maldor’s soldiers. He saw Tristan being ravaged by a pack of dogs. He remembered Norval infected by a poisoned knife. He imagined Aster the hobo being mutilated by manglers. He considered the arrogant, spiteful evil of men like Copernum and Conrad, along with the spinelessness of Dolan. He remembered the deceit Ferrin had employed. And now the man who rewarded evil people and punished good ones wanted Jason to serve him.

“What will happen when I refuse to serve you?” Jason asked.

“You will be turned over to my tormentors, to begin your reconditioning. Believe me, you cannot imagine the exquisite suffering they elicit. They have terrible methods involving magic and toxins along with a wide array of more traditional discomforts. You will languish for years under mind-rending tortures that will eventually decimate your very identity.”

“My identity would be more decimated if I joined you.”

“Well spoken, however unwise the sentiment. You are determined not to serve me, even at the cost of unspeakable torture?”

Easy to act brave now, Jason thought, before the consequences of this decision came to fruition. Would this private moment of valor be worth long years of unguessable torment? But how could he pledge himself to Maldor? How could he let displacers graft eyes and ears to him, to ensure he would live out his days doing evil?

He recalled Galloran stating that being a hero meant doing what was right regardless of the consequences. The thought sent a thrill through him. Galloran had been in this same situation and had made the right choice. Jason felt less alone. Maldor had claimed that his opponents had no heroes among them. But Galloran was proof to the contrary. And Jason would be evidence as well.

Jason took a deep breath. “I will not serve you,” he said. “Your servants are frauds and murderers. You say your opponents have no heroes, but I disagree. The only heroes I have met here have been your enemies. Besides, you’ve already proven yourself an expert liar. How can I know whether anything you have told me now is any truer than your fake key word? How can I expect any good to come from making a deal with you? We have a saying where I’m from. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.”

“We have one here as well. A lie twice believed is self-deceived.”

“It rhymes. That’ll help me remember.”

“Where in the Beyond are you from? You sound American. California, maybe?”

“Colorado. Do you know how to reach the Beyond?”

“I do.”

“Why not just send me home?”

“I do not reward my enemies unless they serve me.” Maldor smiled and produced a small vial with a crystal stopper. “You have my admiration for resisting my offer. My esteem will bring you no mercy—quite the contrary—but you have it, as did Galloran. All who oppose me must be broken. I trust your convictions will be good company once your conditioning ensues. Adieu.”

Maldor unstopped the vial and held it under Jason’s nostrils. Jason held his breath, refusing to inhale. Even so, the fumes rising from the tiny hole were making him woozy. When he finally inhaled, unconsciousness overcame him abruptly.

# PRISONER

Jason awoke on a cold stone floor in a bare cell, wearing only a flimsy cloth. The single door was so thick that when he pounded with his fist, it sounded like he was hitting a wall. High above the door the light of a lantern shone through a barred window. One wall had a mysterious round hole the size of a baseball, at about the height of his waist. The only other things in the room were a small loaf of dark bread, a reeking hole in the floor near a corner, and a shallow depression near another corner where water had pooled.

Jason shivered and rubbed his bare shoulders. He picked up the bread. It felt petrified. He gnawed through the tough crust to the softer inner portion. He began tearing pieces off and cramming them into his mouth. Any bite that included crust took a long time to chew.

The bread was bland with an unpleasant aftertaste, but Jason kept eating until it was gone. He went over and squatted by the puddle. Leaning down, he sniffed the fluid. He touched his tongue to the surface. It tasted relatively clean. After a tentative sip, he began gulping it down.

He sat back and wiped his mouth. There remained enough water in the depression to last a few days, even if some evaporated.

Jason crossed the room to examine the hole in the wall. No light came from it. He could see that it curved away upward. He could not quite fit his hand inside.

He wondered if it allowed his jailers to hear what he was doing.

He put his mouth up to it. "Yeah, I'd like a cheeseburger and fries with a large Coke, easy on the ice."

No response came.

Could it be a drain? What if it connected to a toilet in a higher cell? Jason backed away.

He paced out the dimensions of his cell. It was a rectangle, seven paces wide, nine paces long. The ceiling was high, maybe fifteen feet. The barred window was well out of reach.

After his brief exploration Jason scavenged for crumbs that had fallen from the bread, collecting them in his palm. Then he sat with his back to the wall, nibbling on them. He wondered when he would get fed again. He wondered if they would bring him water, or if he'd have to just rely on the puddle. He wondered when the torture would begin. Maybe they would just let him sit and stew for a few days. Or weeks. Or years. Or decades.

\* \* \*

Jason had been awake perhaps three hours when the snake squirmed out of the hole. It was at least five feet long and had a sleek azure body with dark violet markings.

As the serpent entered the cell, Jason scrambled to his feet. He had been sitting against the wall opposite the hole. The snake curled on the floor beneath the hole.

Jason moved as close as he dared. The head of the snake bulged on the sides, suggesting venomous pouches. A slender ribbon of a tongue flicked out of the mouth, testing the air. Jason backed away, glancing down at his bare feet and legs.

He scanned the cell with new intensity. There was no loose article he could use as a weapon, not even a pebble. Though not perfectly smooth, the stone walls were unclimbable, devoid of any handholds.

The snake uncurled and slithered lazily toward Jason. He backed away. Suddenly it advanced toward him with alarming speed. He had to run in a wide circle to keep away from it, splashing through the puddle.

Jason stood watching the serpent, his body tense, as if he were about to steal a base. The snake raised its head, its flat black eyes expressionless, and probed the air with its tongue.

Without warning the snake streaked toward him again. It seemed to be trying to shepherd him toward the corners of the room, but Jason kept dodging around it before he became trapped.

Moving strategically, he got the puddle between himself and the snake, but the snake went right through it.

Eventually the snake stopped again.

This was a pretty devilish torture. He could evade the snake for a long while, but without intervention the aggressive serpent would eventually strike him. He couldn't stay awake forever.

“My only hope is to kill you,” Jason told the snake. It had curled up, tucking its head away in its coils.

“Are you peeking at me?” Jason asked, squatting.

The snake did not move.

“You really came after me. I had no idea any snakes were so aggressive. Did they train you to hunt people?”

The snake offered no response.

Jason scratched above his ear. How could he kill a poisonous snake when he had lots of exposed skin and no weapons? He wished he had retained the bread. That crust might have been hard enough to do some damage. Of course, his jailers had probably confirmed that he had eaten it before placing the snake in with him.

What about the tiny cloth he was wearing? Wrapping it around his hand might offer a little extra protection. Then again it was nice to have a little extra protection right where it was.

Jason supposed that if he could grab the snake just below the head, he could crush it against the walls or ground. Or if he got it by the tail and kept swinging it really fast, he might be able to bash it to death against the floor.

Now seemed like a good time to try. The snake had not stirred since it coiled up.

Jason could not see the head, but the tail was in plain view. He would have to grab it and start twirling violently. Even then the serpent might be strong enough to turn and strike him, no matter how vigorously he whirled it.

Holding his breath, Jason crept closer, one hand stretched forward. He was only a couple of feet away. Suddenly the snake struck, the head moving in a blur. Jason jerked his hand back and leaped away, letting out an involuntary shout.

The snake had moved too early. It had missed.

The serpent reared up, and for the first time a hood unfolded. It was some kind of cobra.

The snake stayed coiled, but the hooded head rose higher, swaying gently.

Jason backed to the far side of the cell.

Head high, hood spread, it came at him. The hood made it scarier. As before, Jason ran around and around until the snake stopped pursuing. It finally curled up again.

Jason stood panting, staring at the sinuous loops of blue and violet coils. There was no way he could grab the snake faster than it could strike. He

considered going over to the snake and letting it bite him. It was bound to happen eventually. Unless this was some sort of test. Maybe if he lasted long enough, his jailers would come take the serpent away.

Incalculable hours passed. Periodically the snake would charge him, but never with the prolonged vigor of the earlier attacks.

Jason dreaded the drowsiness he felt overcoming him. He slapped himself. He splashed water in his face. He spit water at the snake, which hissed loudly in response, for the first time baring a pair of slim, curved fangs.

“Nice teeth,” Jason said. “Hollow, right? Like a pair of syringes for injecting venom. Oh, I know a thing or two about snakes, pal. Just because you’re going to kill me, don’t pretend I’m not onto you.”

As time passed, Jason caught himself nodding toward sleep standing up. His head would sag and then jerk up, his eyes blinking. Finally he awoke as he was toppling over, but he managed to catch himself. The snake attacked, and it was all he could do to hop clear of the striking serpent.

The near miss helped refresh his senses.

But the clarity did not last. Before long he became sleepy again. All he wanted was to steal a brief nap. The snake was still. Maybe he could sneak a few winks.

No! He slapped himself on the cheek, then began beating his bare chest and legs. As soon as he stopped, his eyes were drooping.

He had felt like this once on a road trip with his family. They had decided to push through late, and at almost four in the morning Jason was riding up front with his dad as they drove along a featureless stretch of highway outside of Mesquite, Nevada. His mom and brother were asleep. His job was to stay awake and watch his dad. He had caught himself nodding and had kept pinching himself to stay conscious. He repeatedly warned himself that if he fell asleep they would all be killed, and that seemed like sufficient motivation to avoid snoozing.

But deep down he had realized he was only the safety net. Every time he’d looked over, his dad had seemed alert. Jason had leaned his head against the window. The next thing he knew he woke up with the car tearing along the shoulder, churning up a huge fan of dust. His dad had overcorrected, screeching across the highway almost to the opposite shoulder. They easily could have died. His dad had taken the blame, but Jason had felt horribly guilty.

Here he was again. Except here he wasn’t just the safety net, and there was no end in sight.

“Help!” Jason cried. “Just so you know, I can’t stay awake much longer! Just so you all know!”

He heard no response.

With a shuddering sigh Jason sat down opposite the snake, back to the wall. After a moment the snake streaked toward him. Jason scrambled to his feet. The snake gave a long chase. Finally it quit.

Jason sat again. Maybe he could teach the snake that even when he was sitting, it would never catch him. Maybe then he would have a chance it would leave him alone when he inevitably succumbed to his drowsiness.

The second time he sat, the snake remained coiled up. Jason stared, tense, ready to hop to his feet. After a long while the snake attacked. He leaped to his feet and sprang away. The snake gave almost no chase.

Jason sat against a wall again. He could feel himself slipping. He closed his eyes momentarily.

And awoke when the snake struck his arm. He shrieked, rolling over. As he staggered to his feet, the snake struck him on the calf.

Disoriented, Jason examined the two spots of blood above his wrist. He had quietly planned that once the snake struck him, he would fearlessly throttle it for some measure of revenge. Now he didn’t care. The persistent snake struck him again on the leg, but it felt distant. He swooned, extending his hands to catch himself as he collapsed to the rocky floor. Was that the door opening? *Too late, guys!* Consciousness retreated.

\* \* \*

Consciousness returned. Jason was secured to a table in a dazzlingly bright room. An old man with a narrow, creased face stood over him.

“I’m dead,” Jason mumbled.

“No, far from it,” the stranger replied calmly.

Jason struggled feebly, testing the snug restraints. “I feel faint,” Jason said.

“I’m sure you do. Is the light too bright?”

“Yes.” Jason blinked several times. “I feel like I’m floating. Did I just start floating? How can I float when I’m strapped down?”

“You aren’t floating. How is the light now?”

“Better. Still bright.”

“I can’t shield the candle any more or it will become impossible for me to see. Your eyes are currently extra sensitive. Squint if you must.”

“You sure I’m not floating?”

“Yes.”

“Are we in a hot-air balloon?”

“No. Do you remember where you are?”

“In the dungeons of Felrook.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

Jason squinted thoughtfully. “Not too bad right now. I guess I should feel more upset. I didn’t want to be here. And that was a mean trick with the snake.”

“But you’re trapped here, so why worry?”

“Good point,” Jason agreed dreamily. “Very good point. That should be my motto.”

“Just relax. The venom will help. I need to ask you some questions.”

“What’s the matter with me? I feel . . . really good but kind of nauseated at the same time.”

“You were struck by a rare serpent whose venom induces an altered state of consciousness. The potency is enhanced when the subject is exhausted.”

“Yes,” Jason exclaimed. “I remember being asleep and hearing it coming—its scales against the stone, but I just couldn’t wake up. Then it bit me. I was too tired.”

“The powers of your memory have been magnified. I need you to answer some questions.”

“Who are you?”

“Call me Damak.”

“I read from a book by a guy named Damak once.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes. *Subtleties of Manipulation*. ‘Manipulation is a quiet tool of majestic power. Artfully manufacturing desires in others to suit one’s own needs can be accomplished on an individual basis, or on a worldwide scope. Clearly, a study of manipulation requires a profound understanding of the selfish motivators that drive men to action. Different motivators function depending on the nature of the minds one seeks to dominate. Manifold motivators are available, including fear, the desire for wealth or respect or power, lust, duty, obedience, love, even altruism. Endless combinations may be employed to reduce the staunchest will to a malleable plaything. Learning to discover the appropriate mix of motivators for—’ ”

“Did you read the entire book?” Damak interrupted.

“No. I could tell you more. I remember every word.”

“So do I, more or less. I wrote it. You are feeling lucid?”



“Yes. I feel very lucid. Good word for it. I can remember so many things. I can remember the colors of the animals that hung from the mobile over my cradle. I had forgotten all about them. They were puffy. A yellow and blue checkered elephant. A red and white checkered lion. A green and—”

“Well done,” Damak said. “Very interesting. That is enough about the animals for now. Do you remember Galloran?”

“How could I forget?”

“Did he reveal any plans to you?”

Jason pressed his lips together, concentrating. “No real plans. He just talked to me up in his tower. He helped me make plans.”

“Did he manifest any desire to oppose Maldor?”

“He said his only remaining purpose of any consequence was advising those who dare to challenge the emperor.”

“How did he help you?” Damak inquired.

“He gave me a poniard and dubbed me Lord of Caberton. By the way, fun fact, a poniard is a knife. He introduced me to Rachel, and gave her a crystal sphere with orantium inside. He gave me directions to the cave where Jugard dwells, but could not recall how Jugard would help me. He told me to use his name among those who oppose Maldor because it would open doors. And he told me that heroism means doing the right thing regardless of the consequences.”

“Did he tell you about a syllable he wrote down?”

“No, I learned about that elsewhere. He didn’t remember.”

“Where was the syllable written?”

“Tattooed beside Kimp’s shoulder blade. I got it at Harthenham. It was ‘rim.’”

“Don’t tell me specifics about the Word,” Damak said hastily.

“It doesn’t matter. The whole thing is a hoax.”

Damak clapped his hand over Jason’s mouth. “Say no more regarding the Word.” He looked away fiercely. “Did you hear anything about the Word?”

“Certainly not,” a nervous voice responded. Jason could not see the speaker, but he could hear the scratch of a quill on parchment.

“Then you transcribed nothing of the sort,” Damak verified.

“Certainly not.”

Damak removed his hand. Jason stared with wide eyes. “Do not be alarmed,” Damak soothed. “I would simply rather not hear details about the Word. Another syllable was written down. Where?”

“Inside the lorevault at Trensicourt. Strange, I remember that syllable too.”

“Interesting. Tell me about Ferrin. Is he loyal to Maldor?”

Jason scrunched his brow. “He said he has no great love for Maldor, and he helped me quite a lot before Rachel found him out, but that was all part of tricking us. He explained that as an observer he could help us at his discretion. I believe he is loyal to Maldor. In the end he betrayed us and refused to relent.”

“Very well. Tell me about the girl, Rachel. She is a Beyonder as well?”

“Yep. From Washington. She’s incredible. I mean, she can be a little pushy, and sometimes acts like a know-it-all, but she really is smart, and she isn’t all talk. You should have seen her at Whitelake! Have you ever met her?”

“No.”

“She’s really cute. I’ve never liked any girl as much as her. I’m really worried about her. I wish I could go to her and help her. Funny, I can’t think things without saying them. It’s like my mouth is tied to my brain. Bad for privacy. Good for you, though!”

“Did you know her in the Beyond?” Damak asked.

“Nope. I met her here.”

“Did either of you come here on purpose?”

“Nope. By accident.”

“How much of the Word does she have?” Damak asked.

“All of it. ‘Arimfexendrapuse.’”

His expression horrified, Damak belatedly clamped his hand over Jason’s mouth. He looked over to the unseen scribe. “You heard nothing?”

“Less than nothing. Must have been the wind.”

“Do not say any of the Word,” Damak urged, taking his hand away.

“Sorry. It just popped out. I couldn’t remember it before, no matter how hard I tried. Funny, I still remember it, even after saying it again. I guess the snake venom works really well.”

“Let’s change the subject,” Damak suggested. “You escaped Harthenham with a member of the Amar Kabal. Tell me his name.”

“Drake. He liked dangerous pies.”

“Why did he join you?”

“Who would eat pies that could take over your life? Why risk it?”

“Focus. Why did he join you?”

“Say no to death pies. Another good motto. I’m getting a headache.”

“Why did he join you?” Damak repeated.

“Tough to say. Maybe because his amar went bad. I think he wanted to die with some honor. You should have seen the dogs he chopped up.” Jason gave a soft whistle. “Poor doggies.”

“And the runt who made off with Jasher’s seed was called Tark, the surviving member of the Giddy Nine.”

“Correct. Your eyes are very close together.” Jason grinned sleepily.

“Stay focused.”

“How do you stay focused? You’re practically a cyclops.”

“Stay with me. We need to discuss your fears. Of what are you most afraid?”

“Getting killed by a puppet. Like a marionette or a ventriloquist’s dummy.”

Someone in the room snickered. Damak looked in the direction of the snickering. “You getting this down?”

“Yes, sir,” came the controlled response.

“What else frightens you most?” Damak asked.

“Enclosed spaces. You know, claustrophobia? Not every type of enclosed space. Some are worse than others. I heard a story about some prisoners of war who were squeezed into these confining boxes for a long time. I would hate that.” Jason shuddered.

“What else? List some.”

“Having body parts crushed or maimed. Finding out nobody has souls. My friends or family getting killed. Suffocating. Getting brain damage. Heights, if I’m not secure. Getting gangrene. Getting radiation poisoning. Titan crabs. Having my eyes poked out. Getting rabies. Having a toothache and no dentist, then trying to yank the tooth out, and having half my jaw break off. Getting cancer. Puking. Having my belly button come untied. The devil. Being tortured. Manglers. Leprechauns. Forgetting a class I signed up for and then remembering on the day of the final. Drinking rotten milk. Earaches. Catching on fire. Getting lost. Dying. Finding out—”

Jason stopped speaking and began to lurch against the immobilizing straps. It felt like somebody had lit a string of firecrackers inside his head. His eyes rolled back, and he jerked and trembled while Damak steadied him.

“What else do you fear?”

Jason opened his mouth to speak, but only a tiny gasp came out. The spasms increased.

“The venom is wearing off,” Damak said to someone.

He uncorked a vial and waved it under Jason’s nose. The seizures subsided, and Jason sank into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

Jason awoke in what looked like the same cell where the snake had bitten him. His muscles felt sore, as though he had spent the previous day strenuously lifting weights for the first time in months.

He sat up and looked around. A new small loaf of dark bread sat close by.

He picked at the scabs from the snakebites on his arm and legs. He could remember an old man asking him questions. The man had written the book about manipulation Jason had read in the Repository of Learning. What was his name? He could not recall. Yes he could: Damak.

He remembered learning that the venom of the snake was a mind-altering substance. The conversation with the old man seemed like a vaguely pleasant dream. Had he been floating? Maybe it hadn't really happened. Maybe it had all been in his head. He hoped so. He had spilled his guts about Galloran and a lot of his fears, but the specifics remained vague. He had remembered the Word, but he recalled none of it now.

Jason crawled over to the puddle for a drink. Then he retrieved the bread. Even as hungry as he was, Jason crammed almost half the loaf into the hole in the wall to plug it up before devouring the rest.

He felt tired after eating the bread, dimly realizing as he slumped to the floor that it must have been drugged.

\* \* \*

When Jason regained consciousness, he could barely move. Everything was black and smelled like metal. He was inside an iron container tailored to the contours of his body. He was lying on his back. He could wiggle his fingers and squirm a bit, but that was the extent of his capacity to move.

He closed his eyes and tried to resist his rising panic. He hated tight spaces. He had told them that in his dream. It must not have been a dream. He began breathing faster. He tried to thrash against the container but could hardly twitch. Was this a sarcophagus? A coffin? Had he been buried alive? No, he could breathe. There were slits near his nostrils.

He was hyperventilating and getting sweaty. He cried out, and his voice sounded close and muffled.

Jason kept his eyes closed and concentrated on breathing more slowly and deeply. Nobody was going to free him, so he had to get used to this. He tried to go back to sleep but was unable.

The silence was oppressive. He began singing songs. Songs from the radio. Television theme songs. He hummed themes from movies.

He wiggled his body as much as he could. It was tough being encased in such a tight space. The only sounds came from his voice. The only smells were musty iron and his own sweat. The perfect darkness left nothing to look at.

After a long time he heard a door open. He heard footsteps; then a hatch over his face opened. The torchlight was blinding until his eyes adjusted.

A pliable hollow tube brushed against his lips. He could see a hand holding the tube. "Drink," a male voice said.

Jason sucked on the tube and eventually began swallowing water. He paused, then drank more. He had not realized how thirsty he was. The water tasted flat, but he could not get enough of it.

The tube was removed. Dirty fingers began feeding him cold wads of stringy meat. It was not good. It was too salty and may have been raw, but Jason ate greedily. The fingers gave him stale bread, followed by another sip from the tube. Then the hatch closed, returning him to darkness.

"Hey," Jason complained. "I have to pee."

"Then do it."

"I'll drown."

"It'll drain."

"Wait, I have some questions—"

He heard the door close.

\* \* \*

Time became Jason's nemesis. He was trapped with virtually no sensory input. He tried to keep himself company. He recited quotes he remembered from movies. He prayed aloud. He sang. He flexed his muscles and wiggled. He slept as much as he could.

Sometimes he thought about the people he had left behind—his parents, his brother, his sister, his baseball team, Matt and Tim. He wondered if his face was on milk cartons. He wondered if he had been on the news. By now there might even be a headstone in some cemetery with his name on it. Wherever they imagined he was, he doubted any of them would guess he was locked within a sarcophagus in the dungeon of an evil wizard.

He thought back over his adventures, marveling how Maldor could have instituted and maintained such an elaborate fabrication. He wished he could get a message to Galloran that the Word was a fraud. He wondered if Tark and

Rachel had completely escaped, and if they had planted Jasher's seed. He wondered what Drake was doing.

Nobody visited except to bring him food and water. After the few words on the first visit the man who fed him would not speak.

Jason did not know how many times a day he received food. He was losing all concept of time. He thought he was fed twice a day. But it might have been five times a day. Or once a week.

The sixth time the cell door opened since he had been imprisoned in the iron container, Jason was dosing. He awoke at the noise. "I have to . . . um . . . do more than pee," Jason groaned.

There came no answer.

"Don't tell me it will drain."

There was a sound like a body falling to the ground.

"Hello?" Jason called.

The hatch opened. Jason squinted because of the light. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a familiar face peering down at him. Ferrin.

"You look full of goma worms," the displacer said.

"Full of what?"

"No time to explain."

# DEEP PORTAL

Ferrin? What are you doing here?”

“I came to recite original poetry. You’re the perfect audience.”

Jason coughed out a laugh. “You’re here to torture me?”

“I bet you love it here. You can just sleep all day.” The displacer winked, then glanced to one side. “Listen, we need to make haste. I have received a new assignment from Maldor. Since I’m leaving, I thought I might bring you along.”

“But how—”

“Pay attention. I’ve done some snooping. I had to take some risks and use up some favors, but I now know of a way to return you to the Beyond. The portal is in a cave not far from Felrook. I am not supposed to know about it, but I figured it out. If you swear you will return directly to the Beyond, I’ll sneak you out of here.”

“But I learned some very—”

“No, no, no. There is no room for negotiation. I have committed some minor deviations against Maldor in the past. All right, some major ones. But never anything comparable to smuggling a prisoner out of Felrook. I need your word on this. If I smuggle you out, will you go directly back to the Beyond? Yes or no.”

“Is this some kind of trick?” Jason asked. “I don’t get why you’re doing this.”

“Before you found out what I was, we became friends. I regret how our association ended. I’m doing this to show how sincerely I value you. No trick. You’re stuck. I’ll get you out and send you home. It couldn’t be more straightforward. Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Jason heard latches snapping. Ferrin heaved open the heavy lid of the sarcophagus, then helped Jason out.

Jason was relieved to find he was not too wobbly. He twisted and stretched and rubbed his limbs.

Ferrin knelt beside a fallen conscriptor and began stripping his gear.

“What’s going on?”

“Remove his boots.”

Jason went to work. The conscriptor breathed gently. “I take it I’ll be wearing his clothes.”

“Good guess. I think he’s about your size.”

Soon the conscriptor was undressed.

“Get clothed,” Ferrin said. “Hurry.” He picked up the naked conscriptor, dumped him into the container, and closed the lid.

“You knock him out?” Jason asked, pulling on a pair of trousers.

“Drugged him.” He held up a small crystal vial like the one Maldor had waved under his nose. “A potent solution. I needed to be sure he would stay out for a while.”

“Thanks for doing this.”

“I tried to tell you that I remain your friend. Convinced?”

“More than I was an hour ago. How did you know where to find me?”

“I’m a spy. Gathering information is my specialty. It helps that I rank fairly high around here. Felrook is a gigantic bureaucracy. Hurry.”

Ferrin helped Jason arrange his sword, armor, and helmet in proper conscriptor fashion.

“Stay close to me. Be confident. Your face is inscrutable behind that face guard. Say nothing, even if questioned. If I’m asked who you are, I will say, ‘He is not here.’ That will imply that you accompany me anonymously on a highly secretive mission. Which works well, because Felrook is plagued by such secrecy.”

“Sounds good.”

“The only thing that could possibly stop us would be if we encountered Maldor. But that will not happen.” Ferrin wore a chocolate brown robe. He pulled the cowl over his head. “We must move quickly. When Rumus awakens, he will rant and threaten until somebody investigates his claims. By then we need to be far away. You carry the torch.”

Jason picked up the torch. Ferrin used a long key to open the door.

A pudgy man was waiting outside. He had matted black hair and a nose like a potato. He was eating stringy meat from a clay bowl when the door opened, but instantly stopped, wiping a greasy hand on his tunic. He nodded submissively at Ferrin.

“What are you doing out here?” Ferrin demanded.



“Waiting to feed the prisoner, master.” Jason recognized the voice and the dirty fingers.

“It appeared you were feeding yourself.”

The man stared at the ground in shamed silence.

“Finish it, for all I care,” Ferrin said. “I assume considerable nutrition is required to sustain your girth. We administered a toxin to the prisoner to elicit information. He will not awaken for some time.”

“Very good, master.” His eyes remained downcast.

Ferrin led Jason down a hall. Guards opened an iron door, and Ferrin signed a register. Nobody paid particular attention to Jason.

They mounted a long spiral staircase, passing other iron doors. At the top Ferrin signed another register; then the guards opened a heavy door.

Without a word Ferrin strode past them, Jason at his heels. He led Jason through a network of passages, then out a heavily guarded door into a courtyard. The soldiers saluted Ferrin. He paid them no heed.

It was night outside, and overcast. In one portion of the sky a hidden moon made the clouds glow. Covered lamps and cressets shone in the courtyard and on the walls. The paving stones of the courtyard were glossy with moisture, but no rain was currently falling. Jason breathed deeply of the fresh, humid air. He had never felt so happy to be outside.

Jason followed Ferrin across the yard toward an enormous gate. A man wearing a long chain-mail hauberk approached them. “Who goes there?”

Ferrin lowered his cowl.

“Ferrin, you’re dressed to travel,” he said. He had a scar that ran through his upper lip.

“Sorry night for it.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“He is not here.”

“Come off it. Who is he?” The man squinted at Jason, as if trying to penetrate the visor of the helmet.

Ferrin glanced around, never looking directly at Jason. “I see no one.”

“Have it your way. Travel well.”

Ferrin led Jason to the great gate and spoke briefly with a guard, who let them out through a narrow postern door. It began to sprinkle as they made their way down the slick switchback. By the time they reached the landing at the bottom and boarded a small ferry, the rainfall had become drenching.

Ferrin in his hooded robe stood silent beside Jason in his borrowed armor, the only passengers on the ferry, watching the raindrops disturb the lake by the light of a lantern as the craft advanced toward the shore. Jason shivered. The dampness magnified the chill.

The craft landed, and the two passengers disembarked. They walked along a quay to a low building with a slanted roof. Jason waited under the eaves while Ferrin went inside. A young man exited the building and jogged off into the rainy night.

When the young man returned leading a pair of horses, Ferrin came outside.

“Ready to ride?” Ferrin asked. Something in his intonation warned Jason to try to seem like an experienced horseman.

Jason put a foot in a stirrup and swung onto the saddle. His days riding with Jasher had left him feeling much more comfortable on horseback. Ferrin led the way.

As they approached, the gate in the wall protecting the ferry opened. Ferrin and Jason trotted out, Jason squeezing his mount with his knees, trying not to be jounced too much by the jerky gait. The gate closed behind them.

Jason glanced over at the gong. Four big guards flanked it, two under the roof on the platform, two on the steps with hoods up against the deluge.

Ferrin increased the pace, and Jason followed. Once they left the ferry town behind, the night became almost impenetrably black. Only the muted glow of an unseen moon provided luminance.

“Stay close,” Ferrin called back. “I know this country well. Even with the weather we’ll reach our destination in a couple of hours.”

Eventually the rain relented. They followed a narrow lane beneath the cover of trees. Water dripping from overhanging leaves made the rain seem to continue for some time.

A group of men stepped out into the path, barring the way, one of them lighting the scene by unhooding a lantern. Ferrin reined in his horse.

“Who goes there?” inquired the lantern bearer.

“Ferrin the displacer and an unnamed conscriptor, on urgent duty.” He held up a token.

The soldiers cleared out of the path.

At length Ferrin left the lane. The horses squelched across a sodden field as the rain began to fall again in large drops. They pressed through damp undergrowth to pass over the shoulder of a ridge, then followed a rain-swollen stream in the dale beyond.

Ferrin drew up his horse and dismounted near a group of mossy boulders beside a low bluff. Jason did likewise. They tethered the horses, and Ferrin grabbed a bundle from the back of his saddle, leading the way between the largest boulder and the steepest portion of the bluff to the hidden mouth of a cave.

Ferrin paused just inside the opening to ignite a small oil lamp. Holding the lamp aloft, he led Jason deeper into the cave. They climbed upward for a time and then had to wriggle into a horizontal cleft on their bellies and slither forward for about thirty feet. After that the way widened again, descending until they came to a roomy grotto where long stalactites hung over a placid pool of water.

“Come look,” Ferrin said, approaching the brink of the pool.

Jason came up to the edge. The water was remarkably clear. By the light of the lamp he could see a long way down, but the bottom was not in sight. “Deep,” he said.

Ferrin nodded. “This is a gateway. You need to hold a heavy stone so you sink fast. Once you reach a certain depth you will pass through into the Beyond. The portal only works in one direction. You won’t be coming back.”

Jason dipped a finger into the water, sending concentric ripples across the glassy surface. “It’s frigid.”

“Sorry, but this is the only way I know to send you home. And you have to go home. Maldor will not rest until you’re recaptured.”

“Will they link you to me?”

“Probably. I went into the dungeon using one of my false identities, but I expect to be discovered. When they find me out, I must be able to claim I rescued you to mercifully dispatch you and spare you the agony of the tormentors. I will claim to have dumped your corpse in the sludge pits. When I make that assertion, I need to be certain the lie will never be detected.”

Jason glanced at the deep water. “That isn’t what you’re doing, is it? Tricking me into killing myself?”

“No,” Ferrin said gravely. “I know it requires trust, because you will have to sink to a depth beyond the point of no return. But this truly is a portal to the Beyond. One of the last reliable passages from our world to yours. A closely guarded secret. If Maldor knew I was aware of it, I would probably be killed. Jump in holding a heavy stone. You will not return to the surface. But neither will you die.”

Jason clenched his fists. “I learned something very important from Maldor.”

“What?” Ferrin asked, clearly eager to uncover a new secret.

“The Word is a hoax.”

Ferrin stared. “What do you mean?”

“He invented the Key Word as a decoy for his enemies. The Word we learned was real, but it had power to kill a different wizard, not Maldor.”

Ferrin closed his eyes and tilted his head back. He rubbed his forehead. When he spoke, he seemed to be thinking aloud. “That makes perfect sense, but the possibility never entered my mind. The very existence of the Word is a zealously protected secret. Few who serve Maldor have even heard rumor of it. I always thought Maldor was flirting with disaster by not vigorously attempting to remove those who guard the syllables—at least one of them. I assumed they must be protected by some unnamed magic. Now it makes sense.”

Ferrin opened his eyes. “How did you uncover such a secret?” There was urgency in his manner.

“I got the whole Word. It didn’t work, and Maldor later explained it was a hoax, when he tried to convince me to join him.”

“You got the entire Word?” Ferrin exclaimed in flustered admiration. “Well done! I heard you called out something strange when you were brought before the emperor. I assumed it was a guess using whatever syllables you had accumulated. So you had the complete Word, and it failed; then you rejected an opportunity to join Maldor, even though the only alternative was endless torture?”

Jason nodded.

Ferrin plopped down on a rock. “That is integrity,” he muttered to himself. He looked up at Jason. “I’ve gotten myself into much more serious trouble than I anticipated.”

“Why?”

“You have information that could spoil one of Maldor’s most elaborate and secretive intrigues. I mistook you for a prisoner who had failed to obtain the Word. This alters everything. If Maldor suspects I know what you just told me, I’m finished.” Ferrin rubbed his throat. “Not only that, when he learns I instrumented your escape, knowing what you know, I’m finished.”

“So join me. Switch sides. We can escape together, take this information to Galloran. We have to stop everyone from focusing their attention on this wild goose chase.”

“No, no, no.” Ferrin wagged a finger. “Abide by your promise. You go home. My latest mission will take me far away for a time. I will keep an ear to the

ground. I may not be implicated. If I am, I'll have to drop off the map."

"They'll piece it together."

Ferrin arched an eyebrow. "I can't argue. I was spotted leaving with an unnamed conscriptor near the time of your escape. The identity I used when signing the register is one I have employed before. I kept my face hidden in the dungeon, but that won't be enough, not with how hard Maldor will be looking."

"Did the conscriptor know you?" Jason asked. "The one you placed in the sarcophagus?"

"He did not. That was the main reason I used him. He thought he was coming to observe while I extracted information from you. I kept my face obscured and gave him the same name I signed to the register. Still, he knows enough that when they put together the pieces, I'll be implicated."

"You wouldn't have rescued me if you knew the whole story," Jason said.

Ferrin sighed. "Probably not. I neglected to fully investigate those details. I simply couldn't imagine you had completed the Word. Still, all the more reason I need to be able to claim I killed you, so Maldor can believe your secret perished with you. I will behave as though you told me nothing. I have kept secrets from Maldor before. Nothing this crucial, but I might be able to do it. Don't worry about me. One way or another I'll take care of myself. All you need do now is return home. Isn't that what you want most?"

Jason bit his lip. He imagined how relieved his friends and family would be to see him. He considered some of the conveniences of modern life he had once taken for granted—grocery stores, refrigerators, hot showers, air conditioning, toilets. "It was. But this information is so vital. Everyone chasing the Word is wasting their time. And I'd be abandoning Rachel. Maldor is a bad man, who rewards bad people. Would you honestly regret it if someone defeated him?"

"No, assuming someone worse didn't take his place. But he will not fall. The Word was his only weakness, and it isn't real. This is not open to debate. If Maldor finds I've set you free, we'll both be dead sooner than you can imagine. You must leave this world. I'm protecting both of us. We should hurry and find a suitable rock."

Jason hesitated. "Okay."

They began searching around the perimeter of the pool, looking for a good stone to serve as a weight. Jason tried to pick up a large round one, but it was too heavy. When he turned and looked at Ferrin, he saw the displacer lifting a rock at the edge of the water, his back toward him.

"How's that one?" Jason asked.

“Not bad. I brought you a change of—”

Jason shoved Ferrin in the back, sending him into the water, and then sprinted toward the mouth of the cave. He fell flat and began scooting through the low cleft, heedless of scratching and bumping himself. As he came out the far side, Ferrin was entering the crack, dripping wet, bearing the lamp. “Wait!” he called. “You stop and I’ll stop!”

Jason hesitated, looking back through the low gap at the soaked displacer thirty feet away.

“What are you doing?” Ferrin asked calmly.

“I have friends who need the information I know. I can’t just abandon Rachel. She’ll think I failed, and try to use the Word. She’ll end up in the dungeon.”

“You swore you would return to the Beyond if I freed you.”

“Let me see, have you ever lied to me? I think now we’re even.”

“I’ll catch you before you reach the horses.”

“No you won’t.”

“If I fail, you will get picked up by a patrol. Or get apprehended once you are found missing and the manhunt begins. You’ll end up back in the dungeon.”

“I might. You might too.”

Ferrin shook his head in frustration. “At this point Maldor might even send a torivor after you. Have you heard of them? More commonly called lurkers?”

“I’ve heard the name.”

“You don’t want to meet one. Trust me. Just go home. This may be your only chance. Don’t pass it up. Saving you probably cost me my life. Don’t you want to go home?”

“Believe me, I really do. But not as much as I want to help my friends. Too many good people have wasted their lives chasing a lie. Now I know a way home. I can use it later.”

“You’ll be dead by sunrise.”

“I’ve heard that one before.”

Ferrin sighed. “Fine, you win. If you’re adamant about staying here, let me come with you. I can guide us to safety.”

“Sorry, Ferrin, I can’t trust you. A lie twice believed is self-deceived. You’d never believe who taught me that one. If you really want to help me, catch up with me later, at a time when I can trust your sincerity. I would love to have you on our side.”

“I will catch you,” Ferrin promised, voice grave.

“Don’t chase me,” Jason said, picking up a stone. “Do you have any idea how much damage I could do to you while you squirm through there? Ask Duke Conrad.”

Ferrin paused, frowning. Then he blew out the lamp. Jason could see nothing. He heard Ferrin scrambling, and blindly winged the stone sidearm into the crevice. He turned and hurried toward the mouth of the cave, hands outstretched. Several times he stumbled. Three times he fell hard, only to jump back up and blunder onward.

He could hear Ferrin fumbling along behind him, gaining ground.

Jason burst from the mouth of the cave in a wild sprint. Rain fell in a torrent. He could scarcely see. Splashing through puddles and slipping in mud, he wound through the boulders toward where the horses stood tethered.

A body slammed into him from behind, tackling him with a muddy splash. Jason tried to squirm free. His helmet was jerked off, and as he tried to rise, a sharp blow to the back of his skull knocked him forward, robbing him of consciousness.

\* \* \*

Rachel waited beneath a rocky outcrop, wondering whether Tark would return. Lightning blazed across the sky, and for a flickering instant fir trees strobed into view. Thunder boomed loud and close.

She smoothed her hand along the neck of her horse. It was not the same horse she had ridden while escaping Harthenham, nor was it the mount she had used after that. She had traveled on foot, in wagon, by boat, and on several different horses as she and Tark led their pursuers on an epic chase. Time and again, when it seemed they had finally gotten away, a new patrol would start after them.

Shivering, Rachel pulled her cloak tighter. She wondered whether Jason was alive. She wondered if he had used the Word yet. Could Maldor already be destroyed? How would they know if he had been?

Lightning flashed again, temporarily throwing harsh highlights over the landscape. Where was Tark? Could they have taken him? No, he would be back. He always came back.

The rain started pattering hard again. Rachel waited patiently. Eventually she detected the sound of an approaching horse. Or could it be horses? She grew tense as a pair of horses loped into view. Tark sat on one. The other held a taller figure.

“Rachel?” Tark called.

“I’m here,” she answered. “Who’s with you?”

“Drake found us,” Tark replied.

The two men joined Rachel beneath the outcrop. Lightning glared. Sure enough the other rider was Drake.

“How did you find us?” Rachel asked.

“I rode hard,” Drake said. “It was no challenge to follow the patrols on your trail. You create quite an uproar wherever you go.”

“What about Jason?” Rachel asked.

“When I left him, he was entering Felrook for an audience with Maldor. I have kept my ears open but have heard no news since. Perhaps he was not granted an audience. If Maldor had perished, we would have heard.”

Rachel bowed her head. She had hoped that if she and Tark could hang on until Jason destroyed Maldor, everything might change. What now? Could the emperor have killed Jason? No, she would not accept the possibility. They had locked up Galloran—they would lock up Jason as well. He might not be comfortable, but he was probably alive. And if he was imprisoned, eventually they would find a way to rescue him. She had to believe that.

“Drake figured out why we can’t shake our pursuers,” Tark said.

“A lurker is aiding your enemies,” Drake said. “Maldor rarely sends out a torivor. Escape is unlikely, but I will try to help you.”

“What’s a torivor?” Rachel asked.

“I would rather not say,” Drake replied. “They can sense your thoughts. The less you know about them, the better.”

Rachel bit her lip. “What do we do?” she asked.

“The quick answer?” Drake said. “What you’ve been doing. Perpetual motion. If you stop, you will be taken. The time may come for us to split up. For the present we need to ride.”

“They’re not far behind,” Tark said.

Trying to ignore her weariness, Rachel followed Tark and Drake out into the rain. Lightning flashed. Thunder roared. Her horse weaved among half-glimpsed trees, heading down a slope. She had almost forgotten what life was like not on the run. She wondered if she would ever feel safe again.

\* \* \*

When Jason awoke, he barely opened his eyes. He was back beside the pool in the cave, lying on his side near the edge of the water. His head throbbed.



“Welcome back,” Ferrin said.

“I was trying to play possum,” Jason complained.

“Your breathing changed. Sorry about thumping you on the head.”

“You better be. It’s pretty sore. Do you have any idea how many times I’ve been drugged or knocked unconscious lately? I bet I’ve lost a million brain cells.”

“I had no alternative. You must return to the Beyond. I was only waiting for you to awaken so you could hold your breath on the way down.”

Sitting up, Jason saw that a sack was bound to his leg by an elaborate series of knots and lashings. He was dressed in a plain shirt and twill trousers. “Quite a knot.”

“There is no chance you will unloose it before you sink to the Beyond.”

“You took away all of my conscriptor stuff.”

“Better that you enter the Beyond looking nondescript.”

“This outfit will make me look like a hobo.”

Ferrin shrugged. “Best I could do.”

“If you’re Rachel’s friend, tell her the Word is a fraud.”

“I wish I could. I’d be killing both her and myself. Take a deep breath. Farewell.” Ferrin shoved the sack of stones into the water and gave Jason a push as he struggled to rise. Jason caught hold of the displacer’s hand, and both of them plunged into the pool, sinking rapidly.

The water was shockingly cold. Ferrin was above him, being towed deeper underwater headfirst. The displacer thrashed, but Jason had a secure grip. Ferrin jerked and yanked but could not break Jason’s two-handed grasp. Ferrin pulled Jason close and tried to push off with his legs, but Jason kept twisting so the displacer could get no leverage. Meanwhile the bag of rocks pulled the pair swiftly downward. Ferrin went limp. Jason squeezed his hand relentlessly. Looking up, Jason could see lamplight dancing on the surface of the water high above.

Ferrin gave a final jerk, and then all Jason had in his grasp was the hand. Above him, silhouetted against the lighted surface, he saw Ferrin stroking upward.

Jason maintained a tight grip on the hand. It tried to squirm free, to no avail.

Jason continued to sink. His lungs began to clench for want of oxygen. The water was frigid. How could water this cold not be frozen?

Before long he was in absolute darkness. The surface was no longer visible. Maybe, after all he had suffered, he was simply going to drown.

But suddenly something was different. Without changing direction it felt as though he was now rising rather than sinking. Was it an illusion spawned by disorientation? His speed was increasing. The water seemed to be getting warmer and thicker. The bag of rocks no longer pulled him. His lungs burned, but Jason resisted the urge to inhale.

Abruptly he slammed into a yielding surface with great force. He smelled soil and sensed sunlight, although his eyes were closed.

Opening his eyes, Jason found himself lying on his back in a cornfield, soaking wet and covered in dirt. He could not clearly discern whether he had fallen there or risen up through the ground, though it seemed like the latter. Great clods of soil had been dislodged by his arrival, and several tall stalks of corn had been uprooted and scattered.

He sat up, shaken but uninjured, except for his throbbing head.

All he could see in any direction was corn.

He stood, looking around. Endless rows of corn shifted in a gentle breeze beneath the midday sun. Where was he?

“This better be a cornfield on Earth,” he muttered, trying to brush mud from his clothing, succeeding only in smearing it around.

He still had Ferrin’s hand. He set it down and examined himself. His only clothes were the shirt and the pants. They were crude, and the mud made them look much worse. He had no shoes. He hoped he would not have to walk far.

The hand began to crawl across the ground. Jason picked it up and gave it a slap. The fingers opened and closed rapidly as if to express outrage.

“You’re my only souvenir,” Jason told the hand. “I hope you realize I have to get back there somehow.”

Jason shoved the hand into one of the two deep pockets in the front of his trousers. Whenever it moved, Jason slapped it firmly.

It took Jason ten minutes to unbind himself from the sack of stones. He checked inside the bag, to be sure he wasn’t leaving anything interesting behind. It only contained rocks. He took out the rocks and placed the hand in the bag.

Jason struck off in a straight line. He figured if he went straight long enough, he would find civilization. Somebody had planted and was tending this corn. Eventually he would reach a road.

Before long he came to a farmyard. It had a nicely painted house and a barn. A couple of trucks and four-wheelers were parked in the big driveway. A tire

swing hung from a branch. Some toy cars had been left near the swing. Ferrin had been right. This was Earth.

For so long all he had wanted was to get home. But now all he could think about was getting back to Lyrian. He couldn't leave Rachel stranded there! He couldn't deprive his friends of the knowledge he now possessed!

He went to the front door of the house, opened the screen, and knocked. A middle-aged woman in a sleeveless shirt answered the door. "Can I help you?"

He suddenly felt unsure what to say. All he knew for certain was that he couldn't tell the truth. "Hi. My name is Jason Walker. May I please use your telephone?"

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thrilled to have the first book in the *Beyonders* series written and into the hands of readers. This series has been in development for more than ten years, and I'm looking forward to sharing the two upcoming installments. This first book has been through many drafts over several years. When I first attempted to write it, I did not yet have the ability to tell the story effectively. I believe that it has finally become what I was initially aiming for. Hope I'm right. Anyway, many people have encouraged me and helped me along the way.

First off, my wife, Mary, helped me create time to write the first draft of this story back before I was getting paid to write, so the biggest thanks goes to her. Without her support, this series specifically, and my writing career in general, may never have happened.

Huge thanks also go to my editor at Simon & Schuster, Liesa Abrams. She helped me find some key characters and moments to add, and provided smart feedback on issues large and small. She deserves credit for helping me get this book finished and polished. Smart lady.

Simon Lipskar, my awesome agent, got this project organized, and has provided important feedback on the story as well. The whole team at Simon & Schuster deserves lots of credit, including Mara Anastas, Fiona Simpson, Bess Braswell, Bethany Buck, Anna McKean, Paul Crichton, Lucille Rettino, and Lauren Forte. Sammy Yuen Jr. and Lisa Vega deserve big high-fives for designing a cool cover.

Many other readers contributed to the story. Some read early versions years ago—others read more recent updates. These readers include Mary Mull, Bryson Mull, Cherie Mull, Summer Mull, Pamela Mull, Gary Mull, Jason and Natalie Conforto, Dean Hale, Randy Davis, Jake and Dion Gulbransen, Chris Schoebinger, Tony Benjamin, Lisa Mangum, Liz Saban, Nancy Fleming, Sean Fleming, Mike Walton, Ryan Hamilton, and any others I may have missed. Tucker Davis provided a meticulous read and extensive notes. Very extensive. I practically have post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Thanks also to my amazing family, especially my kids: Sadie, Chase, Rose, and the new one who isn't named yet, maybe Calvin Emmett, we'll see. Also Tiff, Ty, Cy, Marge, the cousins, the nephews, the nieces, the aunts, the uncles, and the in-laws. Especially the mother-in-law, who recently provided a very memorable moment while hiking in the canyon near my home, when she laid down on a high trail and puked off a cliff. True story.

And thank you, reader, for trying this book. I hope you liked it. If you did, don't miss the next two! Also if you liked it, please spread the word. People telling other people means everything for books. Visit me online at [BrandonMull.com](http://BrandonMull.com) or on Twitter.

❖❖❖❖❖ READING GUIDE QUESTIONS ❖❖❖❖❖

1. How does Jason cross from our world to Lyrian? How does Rachel cross over? How have characters in other stories crossed from our reality to a fantasy world? Invent a way you have never heard of for a character to cross into a fantasy world.
2. Rachel is homeschooled and shares a close bond with her parents. How do you think that affects her personality? Share examples.
3. Jason is confused about his future and isn't very close with his parents. How do you think that affects his personality? Share examples.
4. Do you think Jason and Rachel would have become friends had they met in our world? Why or why not?
5. According to Galloran, Maldor would rather not kill his greatest rivals. Instead he tests them. He wants to control them or break them. How might turning the heroes of Lyrian into sellouts or broken failures cause more harm in the long run than just killing them?
6. Many people in Lyrian have stopped believing in heroes. Do we have heroes in our world? Who are some of your heroes?
7. Heroes in America can range from performers and athletes to political leaders and teachers, from soldiers and rescue workers to family members. Have any of your heroes ever disappointed you? How can a hero try to repair the damage caused by their mistakes?
8. Who do you think has the potential to be the greatest hero, Jason or Rachel? Why?
9. Many of the heroes of Lyrian are no longer resisting Maldor. Why is the Blind King no longer fighting very much? Why did Nicholas Dangler stop? Why did the seedman Drake stop? What are the differences between their reasons for stopping?
10. Of all the heroes we met in this book, who do you think will have the hardest time rejoining the fight against Maldor? Why?
11. What character from Lyrian would you most want on your side if you were part of this story? Explain.
12. What character from the story would be the most fun to hang out with? Explain.
13. If you could visit one place in Lyrian, which would you choose? Why?

14. Galloran says that being a hero means doing what is right, no matter the consequences. Is that an easy way to live? Why or why not? How can people find the strength to live that way?
15. Jason spent much of the story trying to get home. By the end he was forced to return home against his will. Why didn't he want to go? How would you feel in his position?

Dear Readers,

Many of the characters who only play small parts in this first book end up joining the fight and filling larger roles throughout the rest of the trilogy. One such character is Drake, the seedman at Harthenham. Since his character will play an important role in the upcoming story, I thought it might be fun to let you guys see his point of view the night before Jason dueled Duke Conrad at Harthenham. You already know what choice Drake must have made that night, but this extra scene lets us see him struggling with the decision.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. L. Hill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.



## DRAKE'S DECISION

The fire had burned low within the wide marble fireplace, but still Drake could not relax and slip into a restful trance. In fact he could not even sit down. He paced back and forth like a newly caged predator, not seeing the thick bearskin underfoot, nor the rich furnishings positioned about the room, nor the ornate hangings texturing the walls. Despite the late hour, rest was not presently a consideration. He could not even convince himself to remove his boots.

He had a weakness for good people who did the right thing against terrible odds. It invariably got to him. He wanted to laugh at the fools, to warn them that it was pointless, like trying to smash a boulder with your bare fist. You simply hurt yourself and accomplished nothing. He yearned to scoff at those still resisting Maldor, but whenever he witnessed a truly noble attempt, the laughs still turned to sobs.

Earlier tonight Jason had openly defied Duke Conrad and Maldor together by announcing that he was going to leave Harthenham. Lots of people talked about leaving. It was a frequent topic of idle conversation. Nearly everyone had mused about it at one time or another. Nobody ever took action. Yet Jason had, with boldness and considerable flair.

The boy was too young. Too idealistic. Humans didn't stand a chance. They only had a single lifetime to figure out how to live. Drake felt his dozens had not been enough. The courage he had witnessed in Jason had resulted more from lack of experience than anything. An inability to anticipate consequences. An inability to judge with a seasoned eye. A reckless regard for his own existence.

That had to be the truth of it. Because if it was the truth, it would justify where Drake now stood, the decisions he had made. But it didn't feel true. Not at all.

What had felt true was the thrill that went through him as Jason stood up to Conrad in front of the others. The boy had left Conrad no recourse. The public insult meant the duel had to happen. But the boy had not been witless. Had he allowed the contest to be decided with swords, his fate would be sealed. But

billiard balls? Such a bizarre choice of arms left at least some doubt regarding the outcome. Perhaps the boy had practiced with billiard balls. Perhaps he might even have an advantage.

Drake rubbed the back of his neck. Who was the fool? Jason, for his ludicrous defiance? Or himself, for letting the boy's actions infect his mind? Tomorrow the boy would live or die. Either outcome would change nothing. If the boy survived, he would be immediately apprehended outside the castle walls. Maldor would continue to rule. If the boy perished, he would certainly not be the first.

Life would continue unruffled at Harthenham either way. If Conrad lived, all would remain the same. If Conrad died, there were plenty of others to take his place. The duel meant nothing.

So why couldn't he settle down?

Drake rubbed his temples. He had always tried to be true to himself. Honest with himself. He hadn't cared that it was unacceptable for a seedman to go to Harthenham. What did he care about the opinions of his brethren? It was unacceptable to him that as a people the Amar Kabal had opted not to challenge Maldor. Sometimes unacceptable things happened.

The luxury of Harthenham was seductive. Ultimately unfulfilling, but so easy. He had expected to wrap himself in opulence like a burial shroud. Collectively, the Amar Kabal valued simplicity. He had gone the other way. Over the past years he had probably enjoyed more physical comfort than any of them had ever known. And his seed had withered, as he had known it might. So his long existence would finally end. On his terms.

He stood in the middle of the room—in his opinion the finest room in all of Harthenham—his eyes drinking in the extravagance around him. Who else lived like this? Not kings. They had concerns. The wealthiest merchants? Even more hassles and uncertainty than kings. Only those at Harthenham ate like this, dressed like this, relaxed like this, with nothing required, nothing expected.

Nothing except closing their eyes to the evil that was overrunning Lyrian.

What if he went to Lord Jason right now? Encouraged him. Advised him. The boy must feel alone and overwhelmed. No, by now the boy would be sleeping, and he needed his rest. Drake crossed his arms. He could wait until after the duel. And say what? If Jason lived, he and Tark were still doomed. Drake glowered into the fireplace. If he lent his aid, might he help them survive their departure? Probably not. They lacked mounts. It would be three against many, with nowhere to run.

He needed some fresh air. Needed to talk to somebody.

Drake stalked out of his room.

Harthenham never truly slept. It dozed. Without responsibility, some people became nocturnal. Some lacked any regular sleep pattern whatsoever. Most of the humans here generally stuck to the tradition of sleeping at night, but not out of necessity. There were no crops to plant, no battles to fight, no chores to accomplish. They could sleep their lives away if they desired.

Bokar might be up. And if not, the blob could awaken. The sluggard could catch up on his sleep whenever he wanted.

Drake went directly to his room. A placard beside the door gleamed in the lamplight: BOKAR THE INVINCIBLE. Beyond the door lay a man who had nearly grown to match the size of his reputation.

Drake pounded and then opened the door without waiting. The room was dark.

“Who goes there?” called a voice—not alarmed, just curious. The voice did not sound groggy.

“It’s Drake. Did I wake you?”

“No.” He raised his voice. “Denton! Light a lamp.”

“I can get one—” Drake began.

“Nonsense. What are servants for? Denton!”

“Coming, Your Greatness,” answered a timid voice. A door opened, letting light into the room. Bokar had a fine room. Not quite so fine as Drake’s; the emperor had never been so delighted as when he’d finally corrupted a seedman. But Bokar had been a prize as well—an extraordinary swordsman, a fearless leader, large and strong and able.

A little man emerged from the door, blinking sleep from his eyes. He set the lamp he bore on a bedside table. “Anything else, Your Greatness?”

“Quicker with the light next time,” Bokar griped.

“I keep a lighted lamp beside my—”

“I don’t need the particulars,” Bokar snapped. “Just be quicker. Whatever it takes. Stop dreaming, if necessary.”

“I’ll do my best,” the little man apologized.

“Off with you,” Bokar said, waving a fleshy hand.

“Yes, Your Greatness.”

Not much of Bokar was visible. Just his bloated face and the top of the flabby rolls that descended from his chin. Embroidered quilts covered the doughy mountain of his body. The bed was vast. Only an immense bed could

accommodate him. He lay propped up on an array of pillows and cushions, wheezing air in and out of his burdened lungs.

“You’re too good to your servants,” Drake commented dryly.

Bokar watched the door close, then turned an eye to Drake. “All that man has to do is light my lamps and give me food. And he has others who share the duty. You know many men with an easier life?”

“Around here?”

“No, no, out there, in the real world. Denton has accomplished nothing, and yet he dwells under the same roof as me. The man should bless every insult I throw his way, and cherish every instruction. Small price to pay. Very small.”

Drake smirked. “He never made an impression on the world to rival Bokar the Invincible. Why not have him address you as ‘Your Invincibility?’”

Bokar scowled. “Why do people act like I should be ashamed of my title? I earned that title. Paid for it in blood. Not much of it my blood, but the price was paid. There are plenty of piles of bones around Lyrian that once belonged to warriors who tested my title. There they lie, and here I persist.”

“I’m not sure you could stand any more easily than they could.”

Bokar chuckled, blubber jiggling. “I’m still invincible. Not all the food in Harthenham could do me in.”

“It has certainly enjoyed a fair opportunity.”

Bokar laughed and coughed. “Why did you come here? To trade insults? Why is the seedless seedman prowling Harthenham at this hour? Are there no more lumba berries to be had?”

“Maybe I needed to remind myself why I like it here so much.”

Bokar smiled broadly. “Is this about the young upstart? The lordling? I heard all about it. The castle is abuzz. A duel, they say. With billiard balls, no less. I’ve tried all evening but failed to devise a more ridiculous way to die.”

“It was a cunning move,” Drake replied. “He chose a weapon with which Conrad has no expertise.”

“Because it isn’t a weapon! But yes, ludicrous or not, it was wiser than naming swords. You are impressed by the boy?”

Drake shrugged. “Impressed might be taking it too far. I was moved by his courage. It tainted my mood.”

Bokar guffawed. “Again! Don’t tell me you’re having another crisis of conscience! Drake, how many times do you have to die here before you accept the choice you made?”

“Just once more, actually.”

Bokar rolled his eyes. "Walk away from here and they'll cut your throat before you take ten steps. Maybe they'll bury you beside the little lord. For good or ill, you made the bargain. Enjoy the spoils!"

"You make a compelling point," Drake mused. "This is my final life. Would I rather be buried beside you or Lord Jason?"

Bokar's expression changed a bit. "Are you serious? Or are you just baiting me? I guarantee that your corpse will be much older if it rests beside me."

"But will it rest as comfortably?"

"So long as they don't bury me on top of you."

Drake tried his best to smile.

"Don't show me the feeble grin of a shy youth!" Bokar admonished. "Laugh like a man! Maybe when I go I'll have them burn me. It will light up the countryside."

"It will be the greatest test fire has faced."

"Or they could dump me in the sea. That would be a sight! Imagine the splash!"

"The sharks will feast for weeks."

Bokar glared at Drake. "You're saying the right words, but your heart isn't in it. What's the matter? Don't tell me this deluded lordling actually got to you?"

"Nobody gets to me," Drake said. "But his example started me thinking." He gestured at his surroundings. "I might be changing my mind about all of this."

"I'd think you were jesting if I hadn't heard it all before! Don't be daft! You're too late, Drake. Go have some lumba tarts and slip into a trance. You'll be good as new by morning."

Drake frowned. "I'm not sure I will be. I've changed my mind in the past. About other things, I mean. I've uprooted myself and shifted from one form of living to another."

"You made this choice a long time ago. Well before I came here. You knew it was permanent."

"I had my reasons," Drake said. "Mostly it was my way of surrendering. Partly I wanted to experience the opulent lifestyle. Partly I wanted to bring shame upon my people. They deserve it."

"So what has suddenly changed?"

Drake shrugged. "I tired long ago of this lifestyle. My people were right about decadence. It is comfortable but empty. This is my last life, Bokar. I might not want to die here. This boy, Jason, gives me a reason. An excuse. Another new

resident, a man called Tark, means to leave with Jason if he wins the duel. If Conrad falls, perhaps I should join them.”

“The three of you will die together.”

“Probably. I’ve dodged death before.”

“Tell yourself whatever you like. Why come to me? Sounds as though your mind is made up.”

“It helps to talk about it. It helps to hear your thoughts.” Drake paused, gazing into the eyes of a once-great man. “Honestly, Bokar, if you could be back in your physical prime, would you consider leaving here?”

“We should not speak of such things in soberness.”

“Humor me. I want to know your mind on the matter.”

Bokar sighed. “I joke all the time about leaving here. Many of us do. I know it won’t happen. What would I do without servants to rub ointments onto my bedsores? I enjoy the ridiculous bravado of the idea. I enjoy pretending I’m not finished. It stings to consider the notion seriously. If I could be back in prime condition, I might toy with the idea. And I might get away with it, no matter how many tried to stop me. In my prime I was someone to be reckoned with. But that is all academic. I’ll never be in my prime again. My heart should have failed long ago.”

“Strong heart,” Drake murmured. “If you worked at it, changed your habits, you might manage to walk again.”

Bokar snorted. “Who needs to walk when you have Denton? Don’t make any plans to bury me yet. Obese or not, I’ll still outlive you.”

“Yesterday I might have disagreed. Today I would say that is highly possible.”

“You really might walk away from all of this tomorrow?”

“If Jason wins, I really might.”

Bokar nodded and scowled. “You seem to mean it. If you want my word on the matter, you should probably do it.”

“You’re joking,” Drake said. “Why?”

His face became more serious than Drake had ever seen it. “Because the thought of you leaving makes me intensely jealous. That’s the truth.”

Drake narrowed his eyes. “Is this a ploy? Giving me approval so I’ll reject the idea?”

Bokar snorted a chuckle. “The choice is yours, not mine.”

“I’ll keep thinking on it.”

“I tried to leave heavy matters behind long ago. Can I get some sleep now?”

“Sure.” Drake rubbed the back of his neck. “The boy might lose the duel.”

“The boy will probably lose the duel, no matter how absurd the weaponry. This palace is full of heroes, and not many of them could take Conrad.”

“Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You know where to find me.”

“Want me to extinguish the lamp?”

Bokar shooed him away. “You trying to disappoint Denton? The man lives to assist me with these trifles.”

Drake walked to the door. “Give Denton my regards.”

“I’ll give him no such thing. The man already has too high an opinion of himself. Drake, if they go, you had best join them. Otherwise I expect I’ll get no sleep for months.”

“You that anxious to be rid of me?”

“We all die. In here, out there, sooner, later—it all makes little difference.”

“It might to me,” Drake muttered, and exited.

**Also by Brandon Mull**

*Fablehaven*

*Rise of the Evening Star*

*Grip of the Shadow Plague*

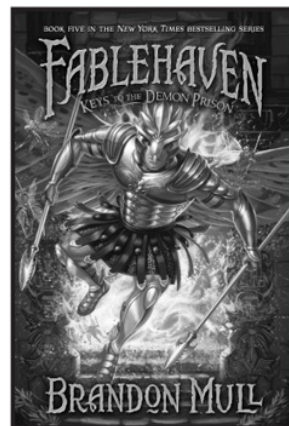
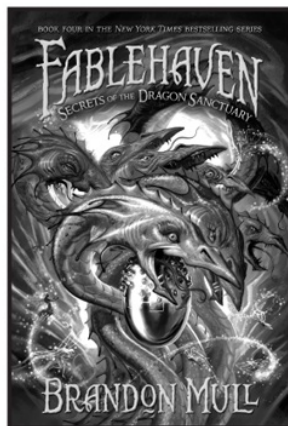
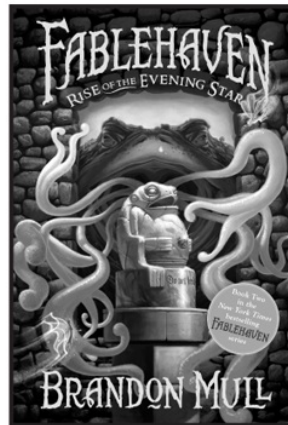
*Secrets of the Dragon Sanctuary*

*Keys to the Demon Prison*



BE SURE TO CATCH  
**FABLEHAVEN**

*Available from Aladdin*



FROM ALADDIN • PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER

SEQUEL TO THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# BEYONDERS

SEEDS OF REBELLION



"AN IRRESISTIBLE MIX OF ADVENTURE, HUMOR, AND MAGIC."

—**RICK RIORDAN**, author of the *Percy Jackson* series on  
A World Without Heroes

# BRANDON MULL

AUTHOR OF THE FABLEHAVEN SERIES

# BEYONDERS

## SEEDS OF REBELLION

◆ BOOK TWO ◆

# BRANDON MULL

Aladdin

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

# CONTENTS

Prologue: A Prophecy Uttered

Chapter 1: The Return

Chapter 2: Giants

Chapter 3: A Shadowy Companion

Chapter 4: Charm Woman

Chapter 5: Lurker

Chapter 6: Aram

Chapter 7: Moira

Chapter 8: Evasion

Chapter 9: Smuggled

Chapter 10: Flight

Chapter 11: Fortaim

Chapter 12: Rendezvous

Chapter 13: Hunted

Chapter 14: Grullions

Chapter 15: The Drowned City

Chapter 16: Globes and Mushrooms

Chapter 17: West Gate

Chapter 18: The Seven Vales

Chapter 19: The Conclave

Chapter 20: The Delegation

Chapter 21: Howling Notch

Chapter 22: The Forsaken Kingdom

Chapter 23: The Sentinels

Chapter 24: The Wild Clan

Chapter 25: The Last Inn

Chapter 26: Foreign Eyes

Chapter 27: The Oracle

Chapter 28: The Prophecy

## Acknowledgments

*To Simon Lipskar and Liesa Abrams, thanks for watching over Lyrian.*





“As maps of Lyrian can be difficult to procure, not all features are precisely to scale.”—Cartographer unknown



“As maps of Lyrian can be difficult to procure, not all features are precisely to scale.”—Cartographer unknown



# A PROPHECY UTTERED

The prince entered the room. Repulsively sweet fumes pervaded the air. The mellow glow of scattered candles left most of the ancient carvings drenched in shadow. It had cost him much to reach this temple. Friends had perished. His family felt certain that he was neglecting his duties to them and to Trensicourt. But he had to know.

Hooded acolytes hoisted chains to raise the dripping slab from the fragrant pool. Her body encased in clay, only the face of the oracle was visible, the single interruption across the wet, smooth expanse. Her eyes were closed.

The prince waited. The acolytes secured the chains and departed. The room became silent as the slab gradually stopped dripping.

Her eyes opened. A milky film covered them, muting the brown of her irises and lending the whites an iridescent tint.

“Galloran,” she said.

“I am listening,” he replied, unsure whether he should have spoken, unsure whether she could hear him. Her ears were hidden within the slab.

“You are the last hope of Lyrian,” she pronounced.

He had suspected this was true. It was why he had come—to hear it spoken definitively. With her utterance, his assumptions hardened into certainty. A crushing weight of duty descended upon him.

“What must I do?” the prince asked.

“Without you, Maldor will triumph. His reign will be terrible. The realm will never recover. You must intervene.”

“I alone?”

“Others will rise to lend aid. The way will be arduous. Many shall perish. Success is unlikely. Yet while you remain, hope remains.”

“Where do I start? Is the Word the key?”

“The quest for the Word will be a necessary part of your journey. I guard one of the syllables. The road is longer than you can guess.”

The prince nodded. “What else can you tell me?”

“Nothing is certain. Many ways lead to destruction. You will be tested beyond your capacity to endure. Should you survive the trials ahead, you will be a husband without a wife, a father without a son, a hero without a quest, and a king without a country. But take heart. Some must lose the way to find it. Some must be empty before they are full, weak before they are strong, and blind before they can see.”

# THE RETURN

On a warm August morning, Jason Walker crouched behind a young batter and a little catcher, eyes intent on the invisible rectangle of the strike zone, a mask limiting his view. Some of the umpires in this league braved home plate without the mask, but Jason's parents had insisted he wear one. Based on the symptoms Jason had described back in June, doctors had concluded that a concussion must have initiated the mysterious disappearance that ended when he showed up at a farmhouse in Iowa, claiming he had no recollection of the prior four months.

The small pitcher went into his stretch. He glanced at the runner on third, then at the runner on first. The pitcher was in a tight spot. It was the third round of the summer league playoffs. His team led by one run, this was the final inning, there were two outs, and the count was three balls, two strikes. The pudgy kid at the plate was the second-best hitter on the opposing team.

The runner on first was taking a huge lead. The pitcher stepped off the rubber and winged the ball to the first baseman. The runner dove to make it back to the bag, then asked for time so he could stand.

The pitcher got the ball back. Again the runner on first took a greedy lead. The pitcher threw to first again, but the first baseman dropped the ball. Although the baseball did not roll far, the runner on third dashed for home. The batter backed away.

"Throw home!" the pitcher yelled as the first baseman grabbed the ball.

The ball streaked through the air to the catcher, who had the runner beat. The runner dropped his shoulder, plowing into the catcher as he got tagged before stepping on home plate. The little catcher flopped backward into the dirt, the ball dropping from his mitt.

"You're out," Jason called, pumping his fist.

The players on the field cheered. The coach of the opposing team, a skinny man with a dark suntan and a darker mustache, charged over to Jason. The coach was already hollering before he reached home plate, eyes bulging, spittle

flying from his chapped lips. “What’s wrong with you, ump? What kind of call was that? This is our season! Are you blind? He dropped the ball!”

Taking off his mask, Jason stared at the outraged coach. Within the past six months, Jason had confronted a giant bloodthirsty crab, outfoxed a brilliant chancellor, dueled a vengeful duke, and defied an evil emperor. He was not intimidated by Coach Leo. The coach kicked dust at him and gestured wildly. Veins stood out in his neck. Apparently he was emulating the tantrum of some major league manager he had seen on television.

Matt, the first base umpire, hurried over. He got between Jason and the furious coach. “Hey, settle down,” he insisted.

“It’s okay,” Jason said, stepping around his friend. “Look, do you want to listen to me or get banned from this league?”

The coach closed his mouth, hands on his hips, eyes smoldering. His expression warned that nothing Jason could say would appease him.

“The rules of this league demand that the runner slide for a close play at home.”

“What kind of rule is that?” The coach remained angry, but sounded less certain.

“A rule to prevent nine-year-old catchers from being hospitalized. If your runner had beaten the throw, I’d make an exception, but he was tagged and only made it home because he didn’t slide. Next season, learn the rules, then teach them to your players.”

“Ump’s right, Leo,” the scorekeeper drawled from behind the backstop.

The coach sneered but had no reply. He glanced around at the parents staring at him from the aluminum bleachers, then turned to glare at Jason, as if blaming him for the embarrassing display.

Jason raised his eyebrows.

The coach returned to his dugout.

“Good job,” Matt said, clapping Jason on the back. “Way to keep cool.”

“I have to remind myself these guys are just somebody’s dad, desperate to see their kid win. In a way it’s nice that they care.”

“Sports turn a lot of people into hotheads,” Matt said.

Jason took a deep breath, trying to dismiss the incident. “Should we get out of here?”

“Sure.” They started walking toward their bikes. The teams huddled up to shout cheers. “Are you coming to Tim’s party tonight?”

“The pool party? I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Come on,” Matt urged. “It’ll be fun. It won’t stay warm forever.”

“We’ll see.”

“Which means no,” Matt sighed. “At some point you should consider rejoining the living.”

Jason was unsure how to respond. How could he explain what was really troubling him? His friends assumed that his reclusive behavior was due to his newfound infamy following the four months when he had dropped off the map. His disappearance had made the national news, as had his sudden reappearance after most had assumed he was dead. True, his absence had created some serious hassles. There had been dozens of interview requests. While some reporters were supportive, others had accused him of faking the incident, of deliberately hiding. Plus, the lost time had complicated his schooling. After counseling with his parents and teachers, Jason had spent much of the summer finishing packets of work that would enable him to advance to the next grade in the fall.

His real problem was not being able to tell anyone the truth. He had been to another world. He had made friends there, and enemies. He had risked his life and had accomplished great deeds. And he had returned home against his will, leaving behind tons of unfinished business. He had left a girl from Washington stranded there. And he knew a vital secret that would change how the heroes of that world tried to resist the emperor Maldor.

How could he explain any of this to Matt? To his parents? No matter what evidence he produced or details he supplied, nobody could possibly believe him. These burdens had to remain private. Although his experiences in Lyrian consumed his thoughts, if he tried to share what had really happened, he would wind up in a mental hospital!

Of all his friends, Matt had tried the hardest to be there for him. After returning from Lyrian, Jason had quit playing baseball. His prior goals as a pitcher had seemed insignificant compared to his new concerns. But he still loved the game, so he had volunteered during the summer as an umpire for a couple of the younger leagues. The volunteer gig carried little pressure and required much less time than actually playing and practicing. Matt had volunteered as well, just to hang out with him.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “I’m no fun anymore. I’ve warned you, my head is a mess. I wish I could explain.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Matt said, grabbing his bike. “Who wouldn’t feel a little different after all you’ve been through? Nobody minds. Nobody who

matters. If you could just relax, you'd see that not so much has changed. Who cares whether you pitch or not? Everyone wants you around again."

"Thanks," Jason said, stuffing his umpire gear into a sports bag. "I'll try to come."

Matt studied him. "We could go together. Want me to swing by?"

"Better not."

Matt nodded knowingly. "How about some lunch? You hungry?"

"I'm good. Maybe I'll see you tonight."

Matt shrugged. "Have it your way. Catch you later."

Matt pedaled away on his bike. Jason climbed onto his own bike and headed home. If he wasn't careful, soon he'd have no friends left. Was he deliberately pushing everyone away? Having unfinished business in Lyrian did not guarantee he would find a way back there. Like it or not, he might need to start living an actual life in this world again. After all, school would resume in less than a month. A regular schedule would make it much tougher to behave like a hermit.

When Jason got home, he left his bike in the garage and looked out back for Shadow, his Labrador. He came up empty. Nobody was home. His parents had grown closer to the dog during Jason's absence and had probably taken him for a walk.

Jason retreated to his room. He had spent a lot of time there lately. He went to his closet and got down a shoe box from the top shelf. From a drawer he collected a spiral notebook and a pen. Removing a pair of rubber bands, he opened the shoe box and took out a human hand. The severed wrist revealed a perfect cross section of bone, muscle, tendon, nerves, and blood vessels.

H-E-L-L-O. Jason traced the letters on the palm. He set the hand down and picked up his pen, ready to transcribe.

*Not now*, the hand spelled hastily in sign language.

Ferrin must be in some sort of trouble again. Jason had established contact with the displacer not long after returning from Iowa. He had taught Ferrin the sign language alphabet using a book from the public library. The tedious communication was his only link to Lyrian, and Jason had faithfully logged all of their conversations.

Jason felt grateful for the living hand. It represented his only tangible evidence of all that had happened. Without it, he wondered if he would eventually have come to believe his months in a parallel universe had been an elaborate delusion.

Back in June, soon after receiving word from their son, Jason's parents had driven from Colorado to pick him up in Iowa. His father had good insurance, so not long after Jason related his story of a four-month blackout during which he had somehow traveled hundreds of miles to awaken wearing filthy homespun clothes in a cornfield, he was referred to a neurologist. Jason affirmed to the specialist that he recalled nothing after reporting for work the day he was tagged in the head by a baseball, resisting the temptation to fabricate a horrific tale of alien abductors, sterile lights, and invasive probes. When asked how he got to Iowa, Jason had theorized that he might be a narcoleptic sleepwalker.

After an MRI, the neurologist confirmed that if the blow had resulted in a concussion, as she assumed based on the symptoms Jason had described, it had left no lasting visible damage. Jason was diagnosed with some form of anterograde amnesia, which the neurologist explained as an inability to remember events subsequent to brain trauma.

Jason had a hunch that the neurologist didn't wholly believe the story, but she never went so far as to call him a liar. His parents had been perplexed that given all the media attention Jason's disappearance had received, nobody had noticed him wandering the country for months as an amnesiac. They had insisted that Jason see a therapist, who had blatantly tried to investigate whether Jason was telling the truth about his lost months, but all Jason confessed to was a dream involving many of the details from Lyrian. In the end, the scrutiny had finally subsided.

Jason had considered confessing everything to his parents and trying to use the severed hand as evidence. But he had finally decided that although the lively hand was an inexplicable oddity, it was far from concrete proof that he had journeyed to another world. The hand would only raise a more lingering batch of unanswerable questions.

After putting the hand back into the shoe box, Jason went to his computer and turned it on. Besides the hand, he had one other source of evidence that his trip to Lyrian had actually happened. He went into his photos folder, then clicked through a maze of folders within folders until arriving at one marked "Rachel."

Inside that folder, he found images of Rachel Marie Woodruff, a thirteen-year-old girl from Olympia, Washington, who had gone missing in Arches National Park the same day that Jason had vanished. Jason had acquired the images from sites all over the Internet.

Apparently wealth and connections mattered, because Rachel's parents had managed to turn her disappearance into one of the biggest news stories of the year. The case was particularly baffling because the family had been alone with a guide in such remote country. Rachel had vanished quickly and quietly. The huge team of hastily summoned rescuers had found no body and no trace of violence. Her tracks had led to a natural stone arch where all evidence abruptly ceased.

For earning media exposure, it also didn't hurt that Rachel was quite photogenic and her family had dozens of recent pictures to display. Not to mention that her father had offered a no-questions-asked million-dollar reward for information leading to her recovery.

Jason studied a color photo of Rachel looking up from a canvas she was painting. Another showed her beside a skinny blonde, both of them wearing track uniforms. A third was just her head and shoulders, taken in a studio. She looked like the cute girl next door, but with a little extra style, both in her haircut and her fashion.

Jason had considered making an anonymous call to her parents, just to let them know that he had seen her and that she was all right. But such contact posed several problems. First off, Rachel might not be okay anymore. Last Jason had heard, she had been on the run with Tark, pursued by imperial soldiers. Secondly, if her parents somehow traced the call to him, he had no alibi. He had gone missing at the same time, which would make him a very appealing suspect if he was ever connected to the case. And lastly, he had no idea if Rachel would ever make it home, so it might be cruel to give her parents false hope.

Switching off his computer, Jason rose and started pacing. He hated being the only person in the world who knew where Rachel had gone. He hated being the only person in the world who might be able to bring her back. He hated being the only person in the world who knew that the secret word that could supposedly destroy the wizard Maldor was actually an elaborate hoax meant to distract and measure his enemies.

Jason undressed and took a shower. After drying off and dressing, he stood and stared at himself in the mirror. He had not regained much of the weight he had lost in Lyrian. In spite of his absence from baseball, Jason had exercised vigorously ever since returning home. He threw pitches in the backyard. He jogged. He did sit-ups, push-ups, and pull-ups. He bought books on karate and practiced in his room.



“You know where you’re going,” Jason told his reflection. “You always go there when you’re feeling like this. No point in waiting around.”

He went and removed the hand from the shoe box and placed it in a plastic grocery sack, which he wadded into a black backpack stocked with provisions. He wore a gray T-shirt and tied a lightweight jacket around his waist. He put on a new pair of sturdy boots, zipped a disposable waterproof camera into a jacket pocket, shrugged into the backpack, and slipped a pocketknife into his jeans pocket, just in case today would be the day.

At the Vista Point Zoo, Jason pulled the season pass from his wallet and flashed it to get inside. Ignoring the crowds, he strode directly to the hippo tank. As he had done on more than twenty occasions since returning to Colorado, Jason took up his regular position leaning against the guardrail.

The first time he had revisited the zoo, Jason had intended to leap into the tank and get swallowed by the hippo again. But as he stood staring at the lethargic beast, doubts had begun to assail him. What if the hippo was no longer a gateway? It could have been a one-time occurrence. What if the hippo refused to swallow him? What if it mauled him after witnesses watched him intentionally enter the tank? He would get locked up.

Jason sighed. Every time he came to the zoo, he wore his boots and brought the hand, the backpack, and the pocketknife. And every time he just stared at the hippo until he eventually went home.

He had considered trying to find the stone archway that had brought Rachel to Lyrian. All he knew for sure was that it was somewhere off in the middle of the Utah badlands. The way Rachel had told the story, it sounded like the gateway was only open for a brief time. He also worried that searching for the arch could end up connecting him to Rachel’s disappearance.

One way or another, he had to return to Lyrian. His friends needed the information he knew about Maldor and the fake Key Word. He needed to show Rachel how she could return home. His current life seemed unbearably mundane and insignificant when weighed against the duties awaiting him elsewhere.

Last year, Jason had not understood why Matt’s older brother, Michael, had wanted to enlist in the military. Jason and Matt had argued that the decision was impractical and dangerous for a guy with so many other options, but Mike had been determined. He had joined the marines a month after graduation. It had been something Mike had wanted to do, in spite of the potential hazards

and inconveniences. Now Jason had discovered something about which he felt much the same way.

Perhaps he could learn to ignore his experiences in Lyrian, to pretend that the information he knew was not crucial to the destinies of countless people, including many he cared about. But Jason had no desire to forget what had happened. He had become involved in a struggle much larger than himself, he had people depending on him, he had found a cause worth fighting for, and just when he had gained information vital to that cause, he had been forced to return home.

The hippo was his best hope for returning. He lay at the bottom of the tank, motionless. Jason sighed. Just because he needed to get back didn't mean the hippo would comply.

A little redheaded kid stood beside Jason on his tiptoes. "Make it come up, Mommy," he complained.

"The hippo's resting," the woman behind him explained. "He can hold his breath for a very long time."

Jason clasped his hands together. Should he go for it, just dive in? Maybe. At least he would wait until he was unobserved. Even though the zoo was fairly crowded today, an opportunity would eventually arise.

Secretly, though he hated to admit it, he knew he would not jump. He had already passed up countless opportunities. It was just too uncertain.

"What's that music, Mom?"

Jason glanced at the kid and then listened.

He heard a distant, basso melody, much like a tuba, but somehow richer. Jason's hands squeezed the railing. How long had it been playing before he had noticed it? The resonant melody was gradually increasing in volume. He looked at the woman beside him.

"You hear that?"

The woman nodded, her brow furrowed. "Is it coming from the tank?"

"I think so." Jason bit his lower lip. He could have elaborated that the music was originating from a separate reality through the hippopotamus.

Jason felt his heart hammering. Here was evidence. The gate was open. If he was ever really going to do this, the time had arrived. He would be foolish to expect a more obvious opportunity. He gripped the railing more tightly.

Did he really want to go? How would his family feel? He wasn't much closer to his parents than he had ever been. They had made a real effort after his return, although the attention had mostly made him feel like a psych patient

being handled with kid gloves. He appreciated the intent, and had tried to show it, but he and his parents had never really been on the same wavelength. Once the excitement of his return had faded, the same old patterns of life had resumed. Still, a second disappearance would certainly be hard on them. Poor Matt would be stunned.

This trip to Lyrian didn't have to be permanent, though—he knew a way back. Sure, deadly enemies awaited him. There was a very real chance he would get killed and never make it home. But what he needed to accomplish was worth the risk. He had to let Galloran and Tark and the others know that the Word was a fraud. And he had to rescue Rachel.

Jason glanced back at the Monument to Human Stupidity, a glass case displaying items careless people had tossed into the hippo tank. If the hippo mauled him instead of gulping him into another world, maybe they could hang his corpse in there.

If he succeeded in being swallowed before the eyes of this woman and her son, what would his family and friends think? Surely they'd assume he was dead. They would probably decide he had succumbed to depression and lost his mind. How would people explain the hippo swallowing him whole? Though large, the animal did not look big enough for such a feat.

Then again, as long as he made it back to Lyrian, who cared what others thought? It might be a little harder to explain his reappearance next time, but he could stress about that later.

The volume of the music continued to increase, still just the deep notes of a single instrument. The placid hippo did not stir from the bottom of the tank. Jason rubbed his palms together. He looked over at the woman, who was leaning against the rail, attentive.

She met his gaze and then said, "Isn't that peculiar?"

"Yep. I'm going to investigate." Taking a deep breath, Jason flung himself over the railing and plunged into the water. He stroked down to the hippo, which remained motionless. Hesitantly, he touched him on the snout, receiving no reaction.

Jason surfaced. The woman was screaming and her son was crying. A few people were hustling over, attracted by the commotion. Last time the hippo had swallowed him spontaneously. How could a person coax a hippo into doing something like that?

Jason dove under again. He tried to slap the hippo, but could not get much force behind the underwater blow. He jabbed his fingers deep into the animal's

wide nostrils, and prodded at his eyes. The great head suddenly jerked to one side, making Jason flinch involuntarily. The head swung back and forth before becoming still again. Jason gave him a final poke in the nostril, then swam up for air.

Quite a crowd had gathered. The woman continued shrieking. "Get out of there!" a man shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

Treading water and feeling deeply embarrassed, Jason realized how insane all of this must appear to bystanders. He had a feeling there would be more visits to the therapist in his future. The sluggish hippo evidently had no interest in him, and could not be antagonized. But Jason would try one more time.

Something brushed Jason's leg. He glanced down. The hippo was rising rapidly from directly beneath him, jaws agape. As the bloated brown pachyderm broke the surface of the water around him, Jason was already mostly swallowed. Huge jaws clamped shut amid a chorus of horrified screams, abruptly terminating Jason's view of the onlookers.

Sliding feetfirst down a slick, rubbery tunnel, Jason heard the screams recede as the volume of the low-pitched melody increased. All was dark until he came to a jarring halt, his legs protruding from a gap in a dying tree.

He lay inside the hollow trunk, staring up through the top at the stars, his clothes soaked. The deep, resonant melody continued.

Jason scooted out of the gap, his backpack making it awkward, and recognized the scene—the tall trees, the dense shrubs, the wide river. He was back in Lyrian.

He hurried to the riverbank. The night was balmy, so his wet clothes did not really bother him. A gibbous moon hung in the clear sky, illuminating the river. A small craft drifted on the dark water. A single figure stood on the humble raft, wrapped in an enormous horn.

"Tark?" Jason called in disbelief. "Tark!"

The music stopped. "Who's there?" replied a gravelly voice.

"Jason."

The figure on the raft stumbled. "Lord of Caberton?"

"Yes."

"Are you ... his shade?" The voice sounded awestruck.

"No, it's really me. I'm back." Jason could hardly believe it himself. "Come over here."

The short, robust figure struggled to unburden himself of the cumbersome instrument. Once free of the sousalax, he sculled over to the bank, peering

forward suspiciously. The raft bumped against the shore. Tark hesitated. "Come forward so I can see you better."

Jason realized he had been standing in shadow. He stepped sideways into the moonlight.

"How can this be?" Tark gasped. "You were taken by the emperor."

"I escaped to the Beyond. Now I'm back."

Tark sprang from the raft and fell to his knees in the mud before Jason, hands clasped over his broad chest, tear tracks glinting on his cheeks in the moonlight. "My heart is going to rupture with joy," he proclaimed. "How did you escape?"

Mildly stunned at the exuberant reception, it took Jason a moment to answer. "I had help. Where's Rachel?"

"We parted ways," Tark said. "A strategic move, suggested by Drake."

"Drake? Was this before or after he freed me on the road to Felrook?"

"He helped us before and after. Our enemies dispatched a lurker, so the only way to stay ahead of our foes was constant movement."

"A lurker?" Jason exclaimed. "Ferrin told me that lurkers are really bad news."

"The lurker made matters much worse. Eventually we split up to confuse and divide our pursuers. Drake and Rachel took horses one way, I rode off in another direction, leading a second mount, and we set loose a few other horses for good measure."

"What about Jasher?" Jason asked.

"I delivered the amar of the seedman to his people, at one of the gates to the Seven Vales. He should have been planted weeks ago."

Jason stared down at Tark. "Why are you here alone, playing your sousalax?"

Tark looked away. "Not *my* sousalax. Mine is long gone. I got this mediocre substitute from a pawnbroker. You see, once I assured the safety of the seedman, I kept running, and eventually found my way home. I had no idea how to rejoin Drake and Rachel. I could only hope that the lurker had deserted them to follow me."

"They're also called torivors, right? I don't know much about them, except for what Ferrin told me."

Tark shuddered. "The common name is lurker. Since splitting from the others, I've glimpsed a dark presence in the distance from time to time, but never got an honest look."

"So the lurker followed you?" Jason said. "Rachel and Drake may have gotten away?"

“No way to be sure,” Tark replied. “Having never met a torivor, I can’t be certain what exactly tracked me. I pray that I drew away the worst of Rachel and Drake’s pursuers. For the first couple of nights at home, no longer on the move, I expected to be taken. But no enemies ever appeared on my threshold. Instead, I began to stew. My guilt hollowed me out. I would never have left you behind, Lord Jason, had you not entrusted me with the amar. I would have fought to the death at your side.”

It took Jason a moment to realize that Tark truly felt bad for leaving him at Harthenham. “You did the right thing, Tark. We had to give Jasher a chance at survival. And you had to help Rachel. You did what I wanted.”

Tark’s eyes remained downcast. “I couldn’t shake the certainty that in abandoning you to be captured, I had performed my culminating act of betrayal. Not only had I let the Giddy Nine sacrifice themselves without me, I had forsaken the person who had revived my dignity and granted me renewed purpose. Part of me wanted to mount a solitary assault on Felrook, but the undertaking felt too hopeless and too grand. So I purchased a secondhand sousalax, built this small raft, and tonight intended to finish what I started months ago with my comrades.”

“You were headed for the falls? Tark, you have to overcome—”

Tark raised a hand to interrupt. “Waste no words. Even I can read signs this obvious. You are a specter descended from realms ethereal, and for some unfathomable reason you have condescended time and again to rescue me from self-pity.”

“I’m just a regular person.”

Tark snorted a laugh. “Whatever you may be, you are no regular person. Do not protest. In gratitude, I formally vow to serve you until my dying breath.” He prostrated himself further on the muddy bank, bowing his head low. “I pledge to you my fealty. All I have is yours.” The final words were uttered in profound solemnity.

Jason felt touched by the display. He also felt awkward. “Get up, Tark.”

Tark arose.

Somewhat troubled, Jason folded his arms across his chest. “Look, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“What?”

Jason cleared his throat. “It might affect how you feel about me.”

“I can’t imagine holding you in higher esteem.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

Tark huffed a quick chuckle. "Nothing could make me think less of you."

Jason gave a small shrug. "Remember that night when eight of the Giddy Nine plunged over the waterfall?"

Tark scowled. "How could I forget?"

"Your music summoned me from the Beyond. And once I entered your world, I tried to prevent you from going over the falls!"

Tark sputtered, clutching his head with both hands. "Wait, hold on, you were the accursed interloper who tried to rescue us?"

"I was." Jason knew that Tark blamed the wannabe rescuer for ruining what was supposed to be a majestic sacrifice by the Giddy Nine.

In the moonlight, Tark's rugged countenance slowly became illuminated with comprehension. He spoke like a man beholding a vision. "Then we succeeded." He thrust a finger at Jason. "You were the hero the oracle told Simeon he would summon. And our destruction was not a prerequisite to our success. Quite the contrary ... you arrived before any of us had perished, and you tried to save us from our folly."

"I'm not sure I'm a hero."

Tark waved the comment away. "This is no occasion for false modesty. I believed that by surviving, I had spoiled the prophecy and hindered the arrival of the hero. But I didn't." He paused. "And they needn't have died." His jaw quivered, and then clenched tight. He swiped his forearm over his eyes.

Jason laid a comforting hand on Tark's sturdy shoulder.

"Wait!" Tark whispered in alarm, slapping himself on the forehead. "I am a buffoon! Quick, onto the raft."

"Why—"

"Hurry, my lord," Tark hissed. "I'll explain on the water."

Jason climbed aboard the small vessel, feeling it rock alarmingly beneath his weight. Tark shoved off, sloshing in the water before vaulting onto the raft, trousers soaked to the thighs.

"What—"

"Stay down," Tark cautioned in a low, urgent tone. Jason crouched beside the sousalax. Tark sculled away from the bank, staring hastily about, narrowed eyes searching the night. "I can't be sure I ever lost the being that has been stalking me."

"The lurker?" Jason whispered, the night seeming suddenly chillier.

Tark glanced at Jason. "We don't want to take any chances. It's a dark, slippery creature. Last time I glimpsed it was yesterday evening. If I were its prey,

the villain has had ample opportunities to fall upon me. Perhaps the fiend hoped I would lead it somewhere ... or to somebody. To you, I suspect, seeing as you've escaped."

"What *do* you know about lurkers?"

Tark shivered. When he continued, his whisper was barely audible. "They're foul personages. Unnatural. Nobody really knows much. Drake advised us not to discuss them."

"If it might be after me, I need to know."

"I'm not sure myself. Folks say that if Death took a physical form, he would be a torivor. Whatever has followed me looks like a living shadow, best I can tell."

Jason furrowed his brow. "What should we do?"

"We must separate. You can't afford a lurker on your tail. They're difficult to shake. Believe me, I've tried. Drake tried too, and that seedman has forgotten more about woodcraft than I'll ever know. If we have any luck, the fiend may not yet realize you accompany me. I hesitate, but I think I'll drop you on the far bank."

"Why do you hesitate?"

Tark frowned. "Nobody goes into the forest north of the river. They say giants dwell there, and that few who enter ever return."

"So why send me that way?"

"It's the last place you would be expected to go. And the last place you would be followed. Aside from the shadowy presence, whatever it is, I have noticed soldiers paying unusual attention to me of late. For all I know, some may be trailing me now. I should have paid closer attention. I wasn't overly concerned. I thought I was going to my death."

They were past the middle of the wide river. Jason studied the approaching bank, lined with trees and ferns and shadows. "What about the giants?"

"I have ventured twice into those woods. Not overly far, mind you, but Simeon, our former leader, was curious. There was a man who relished exploration! Anyhow, we went in on two independent occasions for the better part of a day and saw no giants nor any sign of them. There are stories of the old hamlets near the forest being raided, but once the hamlets were abandoned, the stories ceased. Could be the giants moved on. Could be they never lived there."

They were nearing the far bank. Jason clenched his fists. How was he already in such trouble, not five minutes after returning to Lyrian? Then again, what exactly had he expected? With all of the potential danger, he was lucky to have



found a friend so soon, even if they needed to part ways. Jason had an urgent message to share with Galloran, and Tark might be able to help ensure that the message would get delivered.

“If this is our plan,” Jason whispered, “I need you to do something for me.”

“Name it.”

“Do you know where to find the Blind King?”

“Certainly. Fortaim. Same place as ever.”

“I’ve got to tell him something. The secret is so dangerous, I probably shouldn’t share it. But it’s incredibly important.”

“Have no fear. I am your man.”

“Only repeat this to the Blind King. Let him decide who else should know. Tell him Lord Jason got the entire Key Word. I used it on Maldor. It’s a fake, meant as a diversion. Also tell him I escaped from Felrook.”

“You came before Maldor?” His voice was filled with grim wonder. “You used the Word?”

“Yes. It failed. The Word is meant as a distraction. Can you remember the message?”

“Absolutely. We’ll have to warn Rachel as well. I shared the syllable you relayed to me. She has the entire Word.”

“Exactly. We have to find her. Hopefully, the Blind King can help us.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, why the Blind King? I mean, he gives good advice, but what do you really expect from him?”

“Maybe he’ll tell you. It isn’t my place.”

Tark tapped the side of his nose. “More to him than greets the eye, I take it. Have no fear, no matter who is hunting me, I’ll find a way to deliver your message.”

The small craft ran aground. Jason and Tark both hopped out to crouch in the bushes near the shore. Jason eyed the dreary forest.

“So where do I go?”

Tark rubbed his chin. By the change in his expression, Jason saw an idea strike him. “I’ll send you to Aram. Set off to the northeast. Stay on that course until you reach the coast on the northern edge of the peninsula. Do you know the lay of the land north of here?”

“I don’t. Except that we’re on a peninsula.”

“Follow the seashore east toward the mainland until you reach the first big town. That will be Ithilum. Near the southwestern extremity of town, right on the wharf, you’ll find the Dockside Inn. Aram works nights there.”

“Who’s Aram?”

Tark snickered. “A huge fellow, toughest bruiser I’ve ever met. Used to do a lot of mercenary work. Now he keeps things quiet at the Dockside. Our group performed there regularly. We became good friends. He owes me a couple of favors. Tell him Tark sent you. If anybody can keep you safe, he’s the man.”

“Okay.”

Tark began rummaging through his pockets. He brought out two drawstring bags.

“This has some money,” he said, giving one of them a little shake. He then opened the second bag. “And this has some keepsakes from Harthenham.”

Jason peered inside. It was full of jewels.

“Despite my recommendation, Aram may resist lending you aid. Though still strong as a bull and no older than I am, he considers himself retired. But every man has a price.”

“So I offer him the jewels?”

“Not all of them. A few should be plenty. Keep them hidden. Carrying that much wealth can be fatal, particularly in a town like Ithilum.”

“What should I do after hiring Aram?”

Tark scratched his cheek. “Have him escort you to a village called Potsug. It’s on the Telkron River, and has a couple of ferries. After I deliver your message, I’ll either rejoin you there or send someone to meet you. I’ll only stay away if I still have enemies after me. The stableman Gurig is trustworthy. Mention my name to him, then await help in his home.”

Jason repeated the names and instructions Tark had related.

“That is right.” Tark heaved a sigh. “I’m overjoyed to see you, Lord Jason. Don’t dally in the woods. Now I must away. Safe journey.”

“Let me shove you off.”

Tark climbed in and Jason pushed him away from the shore. Tark remounted the sousalax on his shoulders and began playing while skillfully manipulating the long oar. Jason swept his eyes along the riverbank, looking for living shadows or hidden soldiers. All appeared still. After one last look at Tark, Jason crept away from the river, into the gloom of the trees.

# GIANTS

As Jason marched away from the river, the tall leafy trees prevented most of the milky moonlight from reaching the ground. Through the dimness, he pressed between dark bushes with fuzzy foliage, occasionally altering his direction when he encountered thorny brambles and tangled thickets. The farther he waded through the vegetation, the more overgrown the forest floor became. Repeatedly he was corralled by spiny barricades.

He paused several times, crouching beside shrubs or behind trees, listening and watching for enemies. No matter how long he waited, or how intently he strained his senses, he detected no sign of pursuers. Nor did he hear giants stomping around up ahead.

Jason inhaled the scent of little bell-shaped flowers, drooping from a slender stalk. The smell was familiar. He was back in Lyrian, crouched in the darkness, foliage obscuring the moon. Despite the danger, or perhaps in part because of it, his situation felt natural. He could do this. As long as he remembered some of the precautions he had learned from Ferrin and Jasher, alone in the woods he should be very hard to find.

After some time spent gradually climbing away from the river along a clumsily improvised route, Jason blundered onto a narrow footpath. He tried to use the moon to keep his bearings. As his hunger grew, he stopped a few times to get trail mix from his backpack.

Not long after daybreak, with his inner thighs raw from rubbing against wet denim all night, Jason reached a clearing where the footpath vanished into the deep grass of a meadow. Following the perimeter of the meadow, Jason hopped a narrow stream, disturbing a lynx. The sinuous wildcat hissed and bristled, tufted ears quivering, making Jason recoil in surprise. Crouching, he grasped a stone, but the creature sped away, low across the ground, to disappear in the brush.

Not far beyond his encounter with the lynx, Jason found a meager trail running to the northeast. He knelt down behind a thorny bush, just beyond the edge of the meadow, and gazed back across the clearing. After waiting patiently,

he saw the lynx slink away into the trees, but otherwise viewed nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe he really had slipped away from the river unnoticed.

Jason pawed through his backpack for a protein bar, which he ate while walking. The sun moved toward its zenith as Jason advanced along the faint trail. Despite his exhaustion, he wanted to keep moving, at least until nightfall. He hoped to leave behind the forest and the threat of giants as soon as possible.

Some time after the sun passed its apex, Jason spotted a bubble-fruit tree not far off the path. Feeling like a veteran adventurer, he climbed the narrow trunk and plucked three pieces of the fruit. Back near the path, he sat with legs folded, enjoying the break and the bitter juiciness of the transparent bulbs. The taste, the surrounding trees, the solitude—it all seemed familiar to Jason and helped him feel firmly back in Lyrian.

While he sat, Jason removed the hand from his backpack, still wrapped in the plastic sack. Ferrin had taught Jason to recognize bubblefruit trees. Might the displacer suspect he had returned to Lyrian? Could he somehow sense his hand more near? Would it be foolish for Jason to contact him? Ferrin had claimed that he was currently on the run from Maldor, which could mean the displacer and Jason were now on the same side.

When Jason had first made contact, after Ferrin speedily mastered the sign language alphabet, the displacer had offered only terse, vague replies. Then one day Ferrin had related that his participation in Jason's escape from Felrook had been discovered, and his messages became more elaborate. Still, because of past deceptions, Jason felt uncertain whether he could believe the information.

Supposedly, after Jason departed from Lyrian, Ferrin had gone undercover to a prison camp to discover how the inmates kept killing guards without leaving a trace of evidence. According to Ferrin, before his work there was complete, a scarlet rider had arrived with a message summoning him back to Felrook.

Ferrin had acted happy to comply, but quietly slipped away in the night, escaping into the western wilderness, eventually making his way to the port city of Weych. He later confirmed that as he had suspected, Maldor had discovered his involvement in Jason's escape. Ferrin had remained in hiding ever since.

Throughout their conversations, Jason never hid his wish to return to Lyrian, and Ferrin had pledged his aid should Jason ever succeed. But Jason had deep misgivings about relying on Ferrin. Everything the displacer had asserted could have been fabricated to gain his trust. For the present, confiding in Ferrin would be irresponsible.

Invigorated by the snack, Jason stuffed the plastic sack with the hand into his backpack and trotted along the trail. He estimated that back home it was the middle of the night. His summer had been lazy so far, with plenty of sleep, so he didn't expect an all-nighter to give him too much trouble. Besides, with the sun up, it felt earlier.

After some time, Jason reduced his pace to a walk. The day was too hot. Despite the humidity, his jeans were almost dry.

The little path he followed bent westward, then southwest. Jason continued, hoping the path would turn back to the north. The vegetation seemed closer and pricklier than ever.

Just when Jason was preparing to double back, the path intersected a larger trail that cut straight to the north. He followed the northward track, surprised at how wide it was for a path out in the wild. He noticed several places where foliage appeared to have been roughly chopped away to keep it from crowding the trail.

At one particularly mangled bush, Jason paused. Who was tending the trail? The maintenance was deliberate and relatively recent. Could it be giants? Or perhaps some industrious hermit?

Jason studied his surroundings. Given the dense undergrowth, if he left the path, his progress would be slowed to a frustrating crawl. Examining the trail, he found no huge footprints, but spotted traces of animal tracks—deer, perhaps. He decided to hurry along the pathway but to remain attentive. If he heard anything suspicious, he could always duck into the undergrowth.

With the heightened caution of a trespasser, Jason proceeded along the trail. The sun descended toward the treetops. Several times he paused at strange noises, and once he dove from the trail to roll under a scratchy shrub.

Every disconcerting sound turned out to be a false alarm, so it came as quite a shock when the trail curved around a tall bush and he found himself confronted by a twelve-foot giant, clutching a spiked club.

The huge man stood on the edge of the path, face twisted into a fierce grimace. Jason froze, deeply startled, then relaxed. The giant was a rough-hewn statue.

As Jason was calming himself, a shrill voice cried, "State your business!"

The order had come from somewhere before him, but Jason could not see the speaker.

"Keep your hands visible. State your business immediately!"

Jason held his empty hands forward. He still could not identify the speaker. The voice seemed to originate from the looming statue. "I'm just passing through these woods on my way up the coast."

"Dispose of your weapons."

"I have no weapons." Jason held out his arms and slowly turned.

A little man emerged from concealment within the bushes between the legs of the giant statue. He had curly auburn hair and was only slightly higher than Jason's waist.

Approaching with a bowlegged waddle, the small man held his hands palms outward. His tone became less demanding. "I am unarmed as well. If you intend to harm me, please end the suspense and do it now."

"I'm not going to do anything to you. All I want are directions, so I can get clear of these woods."

The little man approached cautiously. His simple clothing was a faded green that blended with the forest vegetation. "Pardon my candor, but if you plan to waylay me, I would prefer to have it done with." He turned around. "There. My back is turned and my eyes are closed. I detest anticipation. If you harbor unwholesome intentions, please have the decency to accost me while I am braced for the worst."

"You can open your eyes," Jason assured him. "I'm not here to bother anyone."

The little man cast a sly glance at Jason over his shoulder. "Well, your honor has saved your life."

Three other little people, two men and a woman, emerged from hiding nearby. They were clad similarly to the first little man, but they all carried bows.

"You might be surprised how many strangers fail that test," the little fellow said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Matt Davidson." The lie came smoothly. There was little chance these dwarfs hidden in the woods were in league with Maldor, but since Jason was a wanted fugitive, it did no harm to take precautions.

"Greetings, Matt, son of David," the little man said politely. "I am Peluthe, son of Rogon." He gave a curt bow. "This is my brother, Saul; my wife, Retta; and my cousin, Ulrun." The others nodded in turn. "Where do you hail from?"

"I'm a wanderer, but this region is new to me. I have spent a lot of time near Trensicourt."

"Where are you going?" asked Retta.

"Don't be so inquisitive," chastised Peluthe.

"You keep asking questions," she complained.

"That's my duty. I'm in charge."

"Then you can cook your own supper."

"I'm headed for Ithilum," Jason said.

His answer defused the argument. Peluthe returned his attention to Jason.  
"Have you not heard these woods are infested by giants?"

"Another question," Retta huffed in a low tone.

"In charge," Peluthe growled back.

"I've heard stories," Jason said. "Any truth to them?"

Saul and Ulrun shared a chuckle.

"Come with us," Peluthe said, "and judge for yourself."

The little people led the way along the path, past the tall statue. As they progressed, the trail showed evidence of increasing amounts of grooming. Before long, the foliage along the sides was pruned as neatly as hedgerows. The group passed another large, menacing statue, and then a third.

"Who's the stranger?" came a cry from up in a tree.

"Matt, son of David," Peluthe answered. "We have found him trustworthy."

"Where are you escorting him?" challenged the faceless voice.

"To the village."

"Is that prudent?"

"He is in my care."

"Very well."

A few more paces, and the path emerged into a tremendous clearing occupied by a village. Little people like those who found Jason roamed the streets, but the houses were enormous. The doors rose at least twelve feet high, the windows were huge, and the roofs towered above the ground. The sinking sun cast long shadows.

Jason halted where the forest path became a gravel road. "It looks like giants live here."

Saul and Ulrun laughed.

Peluthe glared at them. "Once they must have. But not now, or else we all would have been spitted and devoured. We are a small race, an experiment by some long-forgotten, misguided wizard. We're ill equipped to defend ourselves against larger folk such as yourself. When we discovered that the forest was abandoned, we inhabited this empty village."

Jason grinned. "And did nothing to discourage the rumors about giants."

Retta winked. "You catch on quick."

“So what now?” Jason wondered.

Peluthe shrugged. “Enjoy our hospitality for the evening, sleep with a roof over your head, and tomorrow we will speed you on your way.”

“Thank you.”

Jason drew a lot of attention as he strolled into the village. One little woman shrieked. Peluthe and the others repeatedly explained that “Matt” was their guest. They led Jason to a massive two-story house. Three big steps led up to the bulky door. The little people boosted themselves up each stair, and Jason had to take very large steps.

The little folk entered using a small door built into the oversized one. Jason crouched low to get through. Inside, beneath the lofty ceiling, mingled a bizarre combination of oversized and undersized furnishings. Two little women and one tiny old man appeared busy preparing a meal.

“We have a visitor,” Peluthe announced.

“My goodness,” exclaimed one of the women. “Is he safe?”

“Quite safe,” assured Peluthe. “He is Matt, son of David. This is my sister, Deloa; Saul’s wife, Laila; and my codger, Jep.”

Those mentioned smiled and nodded in turn.

“Pleased to meet you,” Jason said.

Peluthe patted Retta on the shoulder. “If you must make added preparations to accommodate our guest, be quick about it. My stomach is impatient today.”

Retta rolled her eyes. “Stop trying to show off in front of our company. I’m either your wife or your slave. You decide.”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble,” Jason said.

“Nonsense,” Peluthe said. “Retta is happiest when complaining.”

“Must be why I keep you around,” she replied.

“He’s gargantuan,” the old man griped. “He’ll eat us all.”

“Behave, codger,” Peluthe scolded.

The old man toddled toward Jason. “We’ll have to butcher a herd of deer just to feed this behemoth.” He tapped Jason with a gnarled cane.

“Be kind, Jep,” Deloa said, moving between the old man and Jason. She smiled up at Jason with wide eyes.

“Don’t you start getting ideas about kissing giants,” the old man hollered, using the cane to pat Deloa on the rump. “We don’t have a ladder tall enough.”

Peluthe, Saul, and Ulrin burst out laughing. Jason covered a smirk. Deloa looked scandalized.



The small front door opened, and two little men entered. "Evening, Peluthe," one of them said, rubbing his palms together.

"Out of here, you two," Peluthe cried, hustling over to the door. "I realize everybody in town wants to dine with our visitor, but we don't have enough as it is. Spread the word."

Dejected, the two men retreated out the door. Peluthe locked it behind them.

Over at the immense fireplace, in front of a huge cauldron, Laila tended a pot on a small bed of coals and ash. "Find a seat," she invited.

The little people gathered around a low table. Moving a chair out of the way, Jason sat on the floor, putting himself at about the proper height.

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable at the big table," Peluthe suggested.

"I'm not that large," Jason said. "Plus, I would miss all the conversation."

Laila carried the pot over, and Deloa walked with her, spooning stew into the wooden bowls on the table. They served Jason first, then worked their way around. Retta collected tough, dark rolls into a pan and offered one to every guest. The little women served themselves last. Once they took a seat, everyone began to eat.

"This is good," Jason said. The thick, meaty broth was loaded with chopped vegetables.

"It better be," the codger griped. "Grew those carrots myself. Best in town. Which gives me an idea." He turned to Peluthe. "What do you say we throw a harness on this great brute and let him plow my field?"

"That is enough, codger," Peluthe admonished, then turned to Jason. "Forgive him."

The codger was shaking silently with laughter.

"No problem," Jason said, after swallowing another mouthful of stew.

Jason remained hungry after finishing his stew, but pretended to be fully satisfied when he complimented the meal.

"Why, thank you," Retta replied. She glanced at Peluthe. "At least some people in the world still have manners."

"Oh, yes, very fine work," Peluthe mumbled.

From the westward windows, golden light streamed in: the final rays of the setting sun. "How far before I reach the northern coast of the peninsula?" Jason asked.

Peluthe squinted. "With those long legs, not more than two days. That about right, codger?"

The old man grunted. "If he fell over, his head would be halfway there."

"Of course, I give you my word to keep your secret," Jason said.

The little people shared sidelong glances.

"Secret?" Peluthe said.

"That the giants have abandoned these woods," Jason clarified.

"Oh, yes, *that* secret." Peluthe glanced up at the windows. "You know, we have another secret. A bigger one. Retta, close the shutters."

Retta snatched up a pole and moved about the room, using it to secure the shutters. The last ones she closed covered the westward windows. "The sun is almost gone," she said.

"Right," Peluthe agreed. He winked at Jason. "Ready for a shocker?"

Each of the little people rose from his chair and collected a coarse, brown blanket from a folded pile beneath the huge table. Most of their knowing eyes remained on Jason as they began wrapping themselves in the blankets. Jason stood up and backed a few steps away, concerned by the peculiar change in attitude. He did not trust the new atmosphere in the room. Their bearings seemed suddenly menacing. Beneath the large blankets, the little people appeared to be disrobing.

As one, the little people dropped to their knees. They clenched their teeth and tightened their fists. A couple of them groaned.

"Are you all right?" Jason asked, growing distressed.

"Be right with you," Peluthe gasped.

Their small bodies began to swell. As the expansion became more pronounced, they all commenced moaning and crying out. After a slow start, the growth came rapidly. A few staggered to their feet, now the height of regular people. Peluthe and Retta shot up taller than Jason. And the growth continued.

Hoping he was not too late, Jason shrugged on his backpack and dashed for the front door. The little door in the base of the larger one had been locked with a key. He slammed his shoulder against it, but the portal would not give. A large hand caught Jason by the shoulder, hurling him to the floor. Eight feet tall and still growing, Peluthe blocked access to the door. Grimacing and coughing, Peluthe doubled over as his body inflated more.

Panicked, Jason turned in a circle. There were no other doors. The windows were out of reach and shuttered. The stairs to the second floor were now guarded by Deloa and Saul, whose sweaty bodies continued to thicken and grow taller. Jason could now tell that the blankets were actually large tunics.

Jason rushed to the huge fireplace, dodged past the fading coals of the small cooking fire, and raced around the great cauldron. The stones at the rear of the fireplace were rough and fitted imperfectly, offering abundant handholds. A hasty glance over his shoulder revealed the former little people wracked by a final onslaught of painful expansion, completing their transformation into powerful giants. The codger stood up. Jason was no longer much higher than his waist.

With speed born from desperation, Jason scaled the soot-blackened stones, certain that a horrible death awaited if he missed a handhold and fell. After reaching the dark throat of the chimney, Jason climbed higher, unsure how far up the giants could reach.

“He’s getting away!” boomed a mighty voice.

“After him, you dunce,” called someone else.

The chimney narrowed as he scrambled higher. Jason did not believe the giants could follow him. He heard the cauldron being dragged out of the way.

“Prongs!” spat a voice directly below him. “He climbs like a lizard!”

“Grab him!”

Jason heard hands scuffing against stone not far below his feet.

“I can’t reach.”

“Well, climb, you oaf!”

“You want to try to squeeze up there?”

Jason reached a narrow ledge where there was a slight elbow in the chimney. He paused, panting, seated as if on a bench.

“Come on down, Matt,” suggested the husky voice of a woman—probably Retta—trying to sound sweet. “We mean you no harm.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Jason called.

“Blast!” the woman shouted. “Why were you so rough with him?”

“I thought we had the pest cornered.”

“Why didn’t somebody guard the fireplace?”

“Who knew he’d head up there?”

“He might get away.”

“No, he won’t.”

Jason heard the big front door open and shut. Not long after, he heard the roof creaking. He was trapped.

“Ho, Matt! This is Peluthe. You hear me?” The voice came from above.

“I hear you.”

Peluthe spoke calmly. "Why not end this silly game and climb down? You cannot possibly escape. We promise to kill you quickly. No prolonged suffering."

"Think about it," Jason said. "If you were in my position, would you come down?" He shifted on the ledge, legs dangling.

"If I were being reasonable, I just might. Even if you last in there until dawn, there are plenty of us to easily slay you. We have weapons."

"You're only big at night?" Jason verified.

"Now you know our real secret," Peluthe answered. "You can understand why we can't allow you to leave here alive."

"Plus, we haven't had fresh human in ages," the codger called from below, his voice now deeper.

"I promise to keep your secret," Jason tried. "Why not just let me go?"

"Deal," Jep replied. "Come on down."

"No, I mean for real."

"Fresh human is a rare delicacy," Jep explained. "It's nothing personal—you seem like a good enough lad. If you would rather not be eaten, a wise policy is to stay away from these woods, and especially from our village."

Jason stared down the chimney in silence. He really was trapped. His demise was only a matter of time. At least he had sent Tark off with a message for Galloran, so his return to Lyrian wouldn't be a total waste.

"Be reasonable," Peluthe pleaded.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," Jason said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, "but I'm going to make this as difficult as I can. You should be ashamed for inviting a guest into your home and then trying to eat him."

"Suggestions?" Peluthe asked, no longer addressing Jason.

"Find a pole," someone proposed.

"Smoke him out," growled the codger.

"Saul!" Peluthe called. "Trade places with me. I'm coming down."

A commotion of voices ensued, with some giving directions and others complaining. Jason heard the giants clomping about. A big pair of hands began piling wood into the fireplace.

"Find greenery," Jep instructed. "It makes more smoke."

Jason heard the front door open and close.

He examined the little ledge he was on. If he put his nose against the rear corner of the ledge facing the wall and breathed through his shirt, he might last for some time. But no matter what precautions he took, eventually he would asphyxiate. If they piled the wood high enough and it burned hot enough, he

might even cook! Jason had known returning to Lyrian might get him killed, but deep down he had not believed it would happen. At least not so soon!

Down below, green boughs were heaped atop the growing pile of wood.

Jason patted his pockets, considering his options. He had money and jewels from Tark, but the giants would not likely accept a bribe when they could just kill him and rob his corpse. He had Ferrin's hand, but there was no chance the displacer was near enough to offer direct assistance. Were these giants loyal to Maldor? If so, could he pretend to be a displacer by dropping the hand, maybe bluff that he was on an errand from Maldor? He doubted whether the giants would care.

Peluthe called to him again, this time from below. "Are you sure you refuse to come down? This won't be pleasant."

"Not to mention that the smoke will sully your flavor," Jep added.

"We could provide a quick, clean death," Peluthe offered. "Dignified and painless."

Jason wondered if he should keep answering. His responses might only encourage them.

"Don't bother playing possum," Retta said. "We're going to get you down one way or another, even if we have to climb up there in the morning."

"I hope I taste like ashes," Jason snapped.

"He's a rather poor sport about all of this," the codger grumbled.

"I'm going to light it up," Peluthe announced. "I don't mind my humans lightly toasted."

Jason watched Peluthe bend forward over the logs. He was clacking some stones together to make sparks. Whatever Jason was going to try, it had to be quick.

"Use the coals from the other fire," the codger said.

"They were swept aside," Peluthe replied. "They're not hot enough." He kept clacking the stones.

"Let me do it," Retta insisted.

"I have it." Peluthe clacked for a few moments to no avail.

"I do this every day," Retta sighed.

"I have it!" Peluthe snapped.

"I'm a servant of Maldor," Jason called down. "I'm here on official business."

"Little late to claim friendship with Maldor," Peluthe replied disinterestedly. "You didn't have any idea what we were when you met us." He huffed with exasperation. "Fine, Retta, you light it."

Jason decided he should send a final message to Ferrin. He took off his backpack and started rummaging around in it.

“Uh, Peluthe, Saul, we have a visitor,” warned a wary female. Perhaps Deloa. Jason heard multiple gasps.

“Great demons from Beyond!” Peluthe exclaimed, moving away from the fireplace and out of view.

“Get out!” Jep cried urgently. “Don’t look at it!”

Jason heard the giants clomp across the floor and out the door. Silence followed. Was it a ruse to fool him into climbing down? A ploy to avoid having him taste too smoky?

“Come down from there, Saul!” Peluthe called from outside.

“Why?” The response came from near the top of the chimney.

“Don’t argue. Trust me.”

Jason heard the roof creaking, then nothing else. After waiting for a moment, he decided to leave the hand in his backpack, and zipped it back up. The zipper seemed unusually noisy.

If the giants had only pretended to leave, they would pounce on him as soon as he exited the chimney. If they truly had run off, Jason could only conclude that his situation had grown worse. What would frighten away a house full of giants? Deloa had mentioned a visitor. Could it possibly be somebody friendly? A good guy?

Biting his lower lip, Jason peered down the chimney. The fireplace remained vacant. He heard nothing.

“Hello?” Jason called softly. “Anyone there? Anyone who hates giants and likes people?”

The silence continued unbroken.

Time passed. Jason breathed the charred odor of the chimney. He became fidgety. Using his pocketknife, he scratched the sooty stones around him, seeing if he could remove the blackness. He couldn’t. Above him, visible through the mouth of the chimney, dusk began to fade into night.

Given the bickering he had heard until they left, Jason did not believe the giants were capable of such patience. Not only was the house silent, the whole village was quiet. Still, he waited. He had no desire to let impatience kill him.

As stars became visible through the mouth of the chimney above him, Jason’s little ledge grew very dark. He listened for clues as to what might have frightened the giants, but heard nothing unusual.

Gradually Jason became convinced that the giants were truly gone. He began to worry he might be wasting his only opportunity to escape. Turning around, Jason climbed quietly down the chimney, feeling for little outcrops with his toes, pausing occasionally to listen. There still was no sound.

Toward the bottom, as the chimney began to widen into the fireplace, Jason lost his grip and fell onto the stack of wood. The green branches on top cushioned the fall, although it felt like he'd twisted his ankle.

Rolling off the mound of firewood, Jason sat rubbing his ankle, staring at the dark room. A pallid gleam from the rising moon peeked through the shutters.

Standing in the center of the room was a human shape.

Squinting, Jason studied the stationary form, feeling chills tingle down his back. It was the size of a typical man, but through the gloom, Jason could identify no details. The figure held perfectly still.

His ankle already hurt less, which suggested it was not broken or sprained. Jason arose. The dark figure did not move. All remained quiet.

The personage could not have missed his fall. "Hello?" Jason whispered. The mysterious figure offered no response.

Jason edged along the wall, away from the fireplace. Whoever stood in the center of the room remained unnaturally still—not shifting, not twitching, not moving its head, not even visibly breathing. Reaching the corner of the room, Jason moved along the next wall toward the door.

The big door had been left slightly ajar, and Jason pulled it open and then stepped out into the night. The village was still. No light shone from any windows. The gibbous moon was rising, large and white over the treetops.

Limping slightly, Jason descended the oversized steps to the wide street. In a window across the road, he met the gaze of a large pair of eyes. The eyes ducked out of sight.

Jason turned to look back at the house he had just left, only to see the shadowy figure standing silently outside the door. Gasping, Jason stumbled several steps backward.

Beneath the direct moonlight, Jason could now see that the figure was truly featureless. The being looked like a human shadow made three-dimensional. No moonlight reflected off its matte surface.

Jason stood frozen, staring. Was this what had followed Tark? Was this a torivor? If so, Jason understood why people compared the creatures to the form Death might take. The unnatural presence of the shadowy being filled Jason with dread.

“What do you want?” Jason asked, his voice cracking.

The silent figure remained motionless.

Glancing around, Jason glimpsed another face dropping out of sight behind a window. Whatever this thing was, the giants wanted nothing to do with it.

Jason swallowed dryly.

He started down the street toward the north side of town. Listening intently, he detected no evidence of anything following him, although his own steps crunched noisily against the gravel road. Whirling, Jason beheld the shadow being standing in the road, about ten paces behind. How could it move with such stealth?

Jason turned back around and walked quickly. When he looked back, the creature once again stood less than ten paces behind him. Was this some kind of game? Jason studied the ominous figure. It made no move, threatening or otherwise. Finally, he continued along the road, walking backward, keeping his eyes on the black figure and hoping it might hold still while he watched, since Jason had yet to see it move. The dark form began to walk, advancing with fluid grace. The shadowy entity made no sound.

Facing forward, Jason hurried out of town. The road became a groomed forest path, cutting through the woods to the north.

Repeatedly Jason glanced back, always to find the dark being standing ten paces behind. He remembered that Tark had mentioned lonely nights when the mysterious creature tracking him could have attacked. But Tark had never seen the creature clearly. He had caught only glimpses. This being did not seem interested in hiding.

Pausing, Jason stared at his pursuer. The dark apparition showed no sign of aggression. But given the reaction of the giants, he had to assume it could be plenty dangerous when it wanted.

After a couple of hours, Jason felt his lack of sleep weighing him down. Tonight was less warm than the previous evening, but with dry clothes, he didn't feel too cold. Finding a grassy patch beside the road, Jason stretched out, wadding his jacket under his head. Would the creature kill him in his sleep?

He had a feeling it might be creeping up on him. Sitting up quickly, Jason found the figure still standing roughly ten paces away.

Lying back down, mind racing, he tried to calm his nerves. Either it would kill him, or it wouldn't. Out here alone in the woods, there wasn't much he could do about it either way.



Jason glanced at the creature. It remained the same distance away as before, still as a statue.

“What do you want?” Jason asked.

No answer.

“Are you the thing that followed Tark? You should keep following him. He’s the real mastermind. Shoo. Go hide.”

No response.

“Okay, how about you stand guard while I sleep. Keep the giants away. Sound good? All in favor, hold perfectly still. Fine, I guess we have a deal.”

Jason felt a little silly, like he was conversing with an inanimate object. Bundling his jacket into a makeshift pillow, he closed his eyes and eventually sank into an uncomfortable sleep.

# A SHADOWY COMPANION

A cold wind swept across the narrow ridge. On either side of him, a sheer drop fell away into darkness. Unsure of how he had gotten there, Jason sensed that something was deeply wrong. He had to hurry. Crouching low enough to almost touch the rocky ground with his fingertips, he moved forward, choosing his steps with care, trying to remain in the center of the jagged spine, despite the buffeting gusts.

From one side came a monstrous roar, like an approaching landslide. A mighty blast of wind lifted Jason off his feet and hurled him to the edge of the ridge. He landed roughly, with his legs dangling over the void, desperately hugging the rugged ground as a flood of wind rushed over him.

As the gust relented, Jason pulled himself forward, swung his legs up, and got to his feet. His torso and the underside of his arms ached and burned with bruises and scrapes. Returning to the center of the knifelike ridge, he staggered forward, currents of air rising and falling, swirling and whistling.

The fierce wind lashed at him with increasing violence. To keep his balance, he leaned into the gale, which suddenly switched directions, and his own effort helped the new gust shove him toward the dizzying brink. He fell to the unforgiving ground time after time, trying to grip with his entire body to avoid being flung to his doom.

He wanted to lie still and wait until the raging windstorm abated, but he had to press on. What was he doing here again? Was something after him? Was the storm going to worsen? He did not understand the logic of his need, but an innate sense urged him to hurry.

He got to his feet and shuffled onward, unpredictable currents thrusting him in different directions. Ahead, through the dimness, he saw where the ridge ended. At the extremity of the rocky spine awaited a table with one empty chair and an occupied seat.

Shouldering his way against a persistent gust, Jason stumbled to the empty chair and sat down. The other person at the table was Rachel! The wind did not

seem to touch her, although it continued to half blind and half deafen Jason.

“Why have you returned?” Rachel asked. He could hear her soft words despite the howling gale. “You should have stayed home. You don’t belong here.”

“I couldn’t just leave you behind!” Jason yelled. “What are you doing here?”

“You should not have come,” she whispered, her expression neutral. “You have condemned the both of us.”

Jason could hear the sound of the wind rising, louder than ever. He knew it was about to hit them like an avalanche. He stood and shoved the table aside. “We have to go!” He took her hand, shocked by how icy cold her skin felt.

Rachel rose. She stood significantly taller than him. Her hand gripped his firmly, so cold that it burned. Her eyes were black—no whites, no irises. “Stay away from me.” She released his hand, and at the same moment, the wind hit, like a tsunami.

Jason tumbled helplessly off the ridge and into the stormy void, arms pinwheeling, legs thrashing. Powerful updrafts slowed his fall, then heaved him sideways and upward. A succession of unpredictable gusts thrust him in various directions, as if he weighed nothing. Had he dropped into a tornado? With wind screaming around him, Jason fell and flew, flipping and twisting, his orientation so disrupted that he lost all instinct for up and down.

Each time he opened his mouth to cry out, wind rushed into his lungs, drowning his protests. Questions surfaced through his panic. How high was the ridge? When would he hit the ground? How hard would he hit it?

The wild fall continued until Jason finally managed a shout. At that instant, his eyelids flew open, and he found himself on his back, beside a path, beneath a sunlit sky. A dark, featureless figure towered over him.

The events of the previous evening returned all at once. Using his heels and elbows, Jason scooted away from the shadowy form without taking his eyes off it. The figure did not move.

After putting a few yards between himself and the dark entity, Jason paused. Fear lingered from the nightmare. His heart raced. Everything had felt much too real. Jason checked his arms, expecting to see scrapes and bruises from the stony ridge. There were none.

He detested that the shadowy figure had been standing over him as he slept. He wondered if the creature had gotten even closer. He wondered if it might have touched him. The thought made him shudder.

The events of the dream left a foul aftertaste. Jason found his hands trembling. There had been other nightmares before the stormy ridge. He could almost remember them. What had they been about? The details dissolved under scrutiny.

Taking a steadying breath, Jason arose. The featureless figure held still, its surface perfect blackness, even under the sunlight, like a void in the shape of a man. Jason had hoped dawn would have driven the apparition away, like a vampire or something. But the inky creature appeared indifferent to the brightness.

Wiping sleep from his eyes, Jason hesitantly approached the creature. "What do you want?"

The tenebrous being offered no indication of understanding.

"Why are you following me?"

Nothing.

"¿Hablas español?"

Nothing.

Jason circled the creature, scrutinizing its smooth shape. They stood about the same height, roughly six feet. The face had no contours to suggest ears or eyes or a mouth. The hands had fingers, but no fingernails or other details. The feet lacked individual toes. The being was like a man reduced to his simplest geometric form.

No matter how Jason positioned himself, the flawless surface of the figure reflected nothing. It was a black that should have been impossible under the light of day. What material could absorb light so completely? Did it have any more substance than a shadow? Maybe that was how it moved so silently.

"I'm not going to harm you," Jason soothed.

He extended a hesitant finger toward the being's shoulder. Would it feel spongy? Hard? Would his finger pass through the surface? The instant before his fingertip would have made contact, the figure moved in a blur, seizing Jason by the wrist and shoulder and flinging him through the air. Jason sailed off the path, turning a three-quarter somersault and landing on a bush.

Stunned, Jason lay quiet for a moment. Would the creature pounce? Follow up the attack? He rolled over, rose to his knees, and saw the figure standing on the road, fifteen yards away, as if nothing had happened. His wrist ached from where it had gripped him. The dark hand had been ice cold.

Jason waded through undergrowth back to the path. "I get it," he said, brushing leaves from his shirt. "Hands off, right? You don't need to tell me

twice.”

As usual he received no acknowledgment. Jason felt angry. He wanted to strike the calm figure, if for no other reason than to earn a reaction, but he had a suspicion that if he attacked, the shadowy entity would knot him into a pretzel.

“Did you give me those bad dreams?” Jason asked, rubbing his wrist. “Was that you impersonating my friend? You both have really cold hands.”

As usual, the being gave no reply.

“Are you a lurker? A torivor? A creepy puppet? Can you speak? Can you understand me?”

No response.

“Nod if you can understand me. You just chucked me into the bushes. You must have a brain. Wiggle a finger if you understand. Tap your foot.”

Nothing.

Jason sighed, exasperated. “Well, looks like I can’t talk to you and I can’t beat you up, and the sun doesn’t bother you. I guess you’re going to tail me for as long as you want. Don’t expect me to smile about it.”

Jason took out a protein bar and finished the water in his canteen. He then set off to the north, determined to distance himself from the giants. The dark figure followed less than ten paces behind.

The groomed path dwindled to an indistinct trail, but continued northward. Jason filled his canteen when he crossed a brook, and ate trail mix. He wondered if his parents were freaking out back home. This time witnesses had seen him get swallowed by a hippo. Everyone would think he was dead. He hoped they wouldn’t blame the animal.

Where was Rachel right now? Safe? On the run? Captured? He wished he could know that he wasn’t too late to help her. What about Tark? If the shadow creature was chasing Jason, hopefully that meant Tark had escaped with his vital message. As he munched on raisins and nuts, Jason wished he had packed a wider variety of food. Maybe next time.

Not long after the path began to run parallel to a little brook, Jason finally spotted a bubblefruit tree. He hungrily devoured some fruit, grateful for something fresh and juicy. Ferrin had once claimed that a watchful wanderer could survive in the wilderness on bubblefruit alone.

Standing near the trunk of the tree, Jason wondered if the shadow creature ever ate. How could it survive otherwise? He watched it. How could something capable of movement remain so perfectly stationary? It didn’t seem to breathe.

Maybe it absorbed air through its icy skin. Maybe it absorbed food. Maybe it was magical and didn't need air or food. Jason decided to try to get some answers.

Holding up a bubblefruit, he approached the dark figure. "Do you eat? I haven't seen you eat. These are pretty good. Want to try one?"

The figure did not stir.

Jason pantomimed taking a bite of the fruit. "I know I'm supposed to be terrified of you, but I started to wonder whether you might be hungry. Here's some food. I'd hate to have you pass out and then stop following me."

Jason held out the transparent fruit. When the dark being made no move to accept it, he tossed it underhand. The graceful creature stepped sideways, caught the clear fruit in one hand, and, quick as a blink, flung it back at Jason. There was no time to react. The bubblefruit splatted squarely against Jason's forehead, spraying his face with juice and sending him reeling onto his side. He remained on the ground for a moment, stunned, his head smarting from the impact and his eyes stinging from the juice.

Clenching his fists, Jason calmed himself. If he attempted to retaliate, he knew the creature would dismantle him. In fact, that could be precisely what the creature desired.

"I don't get you," Jason growled, getting up and using his shirt to wipe juice from his face. "If you want to beat the snot out of me, why don't you just do it? I can tell you could."

As expected, the being offered no response.

"Seems like you only react if I invade your space. Don't worry, I won't try to give you anything ever again. I'll leave you alone. I wish you'd return the favor."

The trail flanked the brook for the rest of the day. By the evening the brook joined a larger stream. Near the intersection, Jason found another bubblefruit tree. He offered nothing to his eerie escort.

By sundown, Jason could smell the sea. He felt exhausted after the long day, and curled up near the creek. After getting comfortable, he raised his head to look at the dark figure.

"You keep away from me while I sleep. Don't even think about hijacking my dreams. I'm going to be ready this time, just in case. Fair warning."

Jason rested his head on his jacket and tried to prepare his mind to dream about happy things. He pictured Rachel excited to see him instead of possessed and warning him that he should have stayed away from Lyrian. He told himself that coming here was the right decision, that he would make a difference, that

he wouldn't die alone in the woods. And he promised himself that if he had another bad dream, he would recognize it and take over.

Jason stood on Zuma Beach in Southern California. He had been here once before, a few years ago while visiting his brother for a long weekend. But today the beach was deserted, including the light-blue lifeguard stations spaced evenly along the sandy expanse. Low gray clouds muted the sun and made the sea look grayer than he remembered it.

A helicopter came up the coast, flying directly toward him. It hovered loudly above, and a male voice called to him through a loudspeaker. "Sir, you do not belong here. The evacuation has been in force for hours. Your life is in danger."

A rope ladder unfurled from an open door, and the helicopter came closer to the ground. Jason ran forward, the sand hampering his strides. The ladder dangled almost within reach. He squinted as the wind from the rotors blew particles into his eyes. Suddenly the helicopter rose, along with the flimsy ladder. Charging hard, Jason jumped, but barely missed the last rung.

"We're sorry," the voice informed him. "We're too late. We have to climb now or none of us will make it out."

Jason gazed out to sea and saw the horizon curl upward, steadily rising as a mountain of water like he had never imagined approached the shore. Awed by the sight, everything inside of Jason seemed to drop, and despair filled the emptiness.

Turning, Jason recognized that there was no escape. At best he might make it to the parking lot. Looking back at the sea, the leaden water continued to ascend. This wave would break over not just the beach, but the coastal mountains as well. He doubted whether the swiftly rising helicopter could escape it.

Still, he ran away from the oncoming tsunami, panting as he plodded across the sand. Could he possibly ride it out? Hold his breath and hope he might somehow make it to the surface before drowning? No, not through miles of water. This would be like having the whole ocean fall on him.

When Jason reached the parking lot, he turned to look back. The great wave was almost to the shore, curling up so high that the top disappeared into the overcast sky. The water before it had receded dramatically, turning the coastline into a sloping desert of moist sand.

"Not the best way to go," said a gravelly voice at his side.

Glancing over, Jason found Tark beside him, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sandals. Otherwise he looked exactly as Jason would have expected.

“How’d you get here?” Jason asked, panic giving way to curiosity.

Tark shrugged, staring up at the looming wall of water. “Serves us right, you know. This is what happens when you bite off more than you can chew.”

“We can run,” Jason said. “We can try.”

Tark grasped his arm, his hand so cold, it burned. “Better to accept the inevitable.”

Jason tugged and pulled, but couldn’t break his grip. For the first time Jason recognized that Tark’s eyes were entirely black.

“Wait a minute,” Jason said, the realization hitting him hard. “This is a dream. You’re not really Tark. I’m not really here.”

Tark grinned darkly. “Tell that to the wave.”

Looking up, Jason saw the wave curling over him—over the entire coast—the wave to end all waves, falling forward, stretching so far beyond Jason and the little parking lot that he could hardly imagine a place beyond its reach.

The sound was like being at ground zero during an atomic blast, so loud that Jason knew he would never hear again. Then he was tumbling helplessly through turbulent water that surged with unfathomable power. He immediately lost all sense of direction and found it impossible to keep the salt water from painfully invading his nose and mouth.

Jason woke up screaming, eyes squeezed shut, drenched in sweat, his body curled into a defensive ball. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at a faceless black head, inches beyond his nose, and screamed again, recoiling as best he could. The dark figure that had crouched beside him stood upright, took a step back, and held still.

Jason rolled away from it, deeply shaken, grateful that predawn light had begun to illuminate the forest. “I knew it was a dream,” he panted, trying to let go of the terror that had owned him. He was on dry ground. He could breathe. “It was horrible and realistic, but I called it. I knew it was you. I couldn’t stop it, but I knew what was up.”

The shadowy figure remained still. Jason found it infuriating to think that this voiceless, motionless creature was getting inside his head and manipulating his dreams. He despised the thought of it following him sedately all day, only to attack him mentally when he was at his most vulnerable.

Seething, Jason lurched to his feet. The creature did not twitch, but Jason reminded himself how quickly it could move when attacked. If he tried anything



physical, he would only get hurt.

Jason stalked over to the figure and stood close, glaring at its blank face. “You’re a coward!” he yelled. “Stay out of my dreams! If you’re going to kill me, let’s get it over with. I’m serious. What’s your point? Why are you here? To make nightmares? Or is that just extra credit?”

The figure withstood the tirade without flinching.

“Are you trying to make me doubt my friends? To make me sorry I came back to Lyrian? Are you trying to provoke me into attacking you? Are you a spy? All of the above?”

The figure gave no acknowledgment of Jason’s presence.

Disgusted, Jason turned away. Why was he wasting his breath? It was like complaining to a mannequin.

Torn by worry and frustration, Jason kicked a small rock into the bushes. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to do,” he murmured bitterly, “but I think it’s working.”

# CHARM WOMAN

Rachel sat on a stone, the stub of a candle in one hand. She muttered a quick Edomic phrase. Staring intently at the wick, she willed it to be the focal point referenced in the phrase, and the candle flamed to life.

She blew out the tiny light. A thread of smoke curled upward.

Rachel repeated the phrase, exerted her will, and the little flame flared back into existence. She held her hand above it, feeling the warmth. She had now performed this trick hundreds of times, but she still experienced a fresh thrill each time the candle ignited.

She blew out the flame, then reignited it.

The effort used to tire her. Now it was easier than striking a match.

She blew out the flame.

Brought it back.

Blew it out.

Brought it back.

“You’re getting too good at that,” a voice said dryly. Startled, Rachel dropped the candle and turned to find Drake standing over her, his dark hair tied back in a ponytail, his flat features impassive. “You’d better slow down, or soon you’ll be instructing me.”

The candle had gone out when she dropped it. She picked it up. “You should let me light the next campfire.”

“I expect you could by now,” Drake agreed. “But we have to keep moving.”

“You found more marks?”

“Fresh ones. We’ve almost caught up to her.”

Rachel stashed the candle in her bag. She and Drake had been roaming these hills for more than a week, looking for the charm woman. Drake had insisted she represented their best chance of getting the lurker off their trail.

After splitting with Tark, Drake had led Rachel deep into the wilderness. The seedman had reasoned that since the lurker seemed to be tracking them for their enemies, the farther they got from civilization, the safer they would be. He

had further hoped that perhaps the lurker would abandon them to follow Tark or else give up after participating in a fruitless chase with no end in sight.

The strategy had succeeded in avoiding interference from other imperial servants. But even after weeks on the run in the wild, Drake continued to catch glimpses of the torivor tracking them. Rachel had even seen it once—a humanoid silhouette crouched on a high ledge, backlit by the moon.

Drake had been able to provide whatever they needed as they roamed secluded mountain valleys and uninhabited forests—fish, fowl, venison, nuts, berries, mushrooms, and bubblefruit all combined to nourish them. The horses also found plenty of opportunities to graze and drink.

As the days passed, and the lurker neither attacked nor went away, Drake had remembered a woman who had once helped him save a friend from a flesh-eating disease. At the time Drake had asked the charm woman how she managed to use Edomic without drawing the notice of the emperor. She had replied that the emperor was well aware of her, but that she had a way of avoiding even his torivors, which allowed her to practice her craft in peace.

Based on that memory, and the hope that the charm woman still resided in the same vicinity where he had found her years ago, Drake had led Rachel south, into the wooded hills west of a sizable body of water called Jepson Lake. He had explained that the charm woman moved around a lot, but left coded markings to enable those who needed her services to locate her.

After a few futile days of wandering, Drake had recognized her marks on a boulder, and although the trail was cold, over the past several days he had maintained that the marks kept getting fresher. Each collection of marks looked like nonsense to Rachel, but Drake had explained that while most of the marks were meaningless distractions, a few left clear instructions once you knew how to read them. When she asked the secret, he said the charm woman would have to tell her, because he had vowed never to reveal how to decode the marks.

During the past weeks, Rachel had tried her best not to fixate on the negative. She tried not to count how many days it had been since she had slept in a bed. She attempted to downplay how many times she had felt too hot, too cold, too sore, or too dirty. She strove to ignore how regularly she had been forced to ride, run, swim, or climb long after exhaustion would have normally demanded that she rest. She pushed away thoughts of her parents. She endeavored to forget about the endless conveniences of modern America that she had once taken for granted.

And she especially tried to not think about Jason.

Whenever her thoughts turned to him, it was like pressing an infected wound, increasing the pain without any realistic hope of making it better. Yet often she couldn't resist. In moments of fear or discomfort, she wondered how much worse he had it, rotting in some filthy cell in the dungeons of Felrook. She pictured him cold, hungry, alone. She imagined him enduring ruthless torture. And she prayed that he was still alive.

Rachel climbed onto her horse and Drake mounted his. He led the way up a forested hillside and down into the valley beyond. He reined in his stallion near a cluster of boulders. She drew up beside him.

"See the grove on the far side of the valley?" Drake asked.

Rachel nodded. "Are the next markings so close?"

"No. Unless I'm mistaken, we should find our charm woman there."

"Really?"

He flicked the reins, and his horse charged forward. Rachel followed, urging her mare to a gallop. The valley floor blurred by beneath her. She had been a competent horsewoman before coming to Lyrian, but after weeks on the run, most often on horseback, riding had become second nature.

It felt good to let her horse race at top speed, even if she had no hope of keeping up with Drake. He had not brought Mandibar to a full gallop for weeks, and Rachel had almost forgotten how truly fast the stallion could move.

Drake slowed his mount to a walk as he reached the edge of the grove. Rachel slowed as she caught up.

"What was that about?" Rachel asked.

He gave her a crooked smile. "Maybe I wanted to remind you who has the fastest horse."

"Maybe you're just in a good mood."

He shrugged. "There's a first time for everything." He patted the stallion. "He's not even tired. I've never ridden his equal. I may not have particularly liked Kimp, but I owe him for his fine taste in steeds."

"May he rest in pieces," Rachel said solemnly.

Drake chuckled, covering his grin with one hand. "It's bad luck to malign the dead."

She had made the same joke a few times before, and only kept repeating it because it always made Drake smile. "Don't be a sissy. He tried to feed you to his dogs. He had it coming." She had also noticed how it amused him when she talked tough. Deep down, beneath the banter, she remained haunted by the

sight of Jasher and Kimp being blown apart when an orantium sphere had accidentally detonated in a grassy field near Harthenham.

Drake dismounted and gathered Mandibar's reins. "Let's lead them well into the trees before tethering them. I don't like how near we're getting to settlements."

Rachel climbed down and led her horse into the grove. "How do we get this charm woman to help us?"

"We ask," Drake replied. "On the only other occasion I've visited her, when she healed my friend Kaleb, she would accept no payment. I take it she'll either aid us or she won't. I expect she will if she can."

They tethered the horses, and Rachel followed Drake deeper into the grove. He kept a hand on his sword. The trees were not very tall, but they had thick trunks with deeply grooved bark. Heavy, twisting limbs tangled overhead. She imagined that after nightfall the place would look haunted.

The undergrowth remained sparse enough to proceed without a trail. At length, Drake waved Rachel to a halt. He pointed up ahead, and she saw a long string of colorful beads looped around the knob of a fat tree. Three feathered hoops hung at the bottom of the strand.

"What is it?" Rachel whispered.

"Charm woman!" Drake called, raising his voice enough to make Rachel flinch. "We have met before! Please console us in our hour of need!"

They waited. Drake held a finger to his lips to discourage Rachel from speaking.

"You may pass" came a reply, well after Rachel had stopped expecting one. The sonorous female voice sounded younger than Rachel had anticipated.

Drake led Rachel past the strand of painted beads. As they advanced, she noticed various trinkets—some fashioned out of metal, some of bone or ivory, others of stone—dangling from other trees and shrubs.

They reached a small clearing. In the center awaited a large tent composed of stitched animal hides in mottled shades of gray and brown. The head of a wolf, still attached to the pelt, lolled over the entrance. Small carvings and graven figures surrounded the tent in a loose circle.

A woman appeared, taller than Rachel, but hunched, with ratty silver hair and a face that looked too young and smooth to match her spotted, wrinkled hands. She wore crude brown garments belted at the waist, and a colorful shawl. In one gnarled hand she held a staff topped by dangling trinkets that clinked when in motion.

“Drake,” she greeted, her voice melodious. “I believed we would meet again.”

“I would not have bet on it,” he answered. “Until recently I expected to rot and die in Harthenham.”

“You have brought a visitor,” the charm woman said. “What is your name, sweetling?”

“Rachel.”

Her attention returned to Drake. “What is your need?”

“We’re being chased by a lurker.”

The woman squinted. “Yes, I have sensed one nearby. It has been years since Maldor deployed a torivor.”

“Can you help us?” Drake asked.

“You have brought a terrible threat my way. But that harm is already done. We shall see if I can help you. Remove your footwear.”

Drake took off his supple boots and Rachel squatted to untie hers. The woman slipped strings of dark beads accented with teeth over each of their heads, mumbling quiet phrases.

The charm woman stepped back and invited them into the tent. Barefoot, Rachel ducked through the doorway. Three large bearskins lay on the ground. Elaborate mobiles hung from the ceiling, displaying a variety of gently spinning ornaments and crystals. Simple dolls made of wood and yarn sat opposite the entry in a staggered row. Incense burned inside hollow statues, aromatic smoke filtering through tiny holes, the heady scent mingling with the earthy smells of ashes and old leather.

The charm woman crouched on a low stool and gestured for Drake and Rachel to sit on the bearskins. The thick fur felt soft.

“How long has this torivor been after you?” the woman asked, her eyes on Drake.

“Five weeks,” Drake said.

“Has it guided soldiers to you?”

“Yes, until I led Rachel far into the wilderness.”

“The torivor has remained with you?”

“I continue to see it. Not clearly or often, but consistently.”

The woman rubbed a coin with a hole in the center that hung from a cord around her neck. “When was the last time you saw it?”

“Last night,” Drake replied.

“Has it visited your dreams?”

“No.”

The charm woman turned to Rachel. "How about your dreams?"

"How would I know?"

"You would know." Her attention shifted back to Drake. "Is it more interested in you or the girl?"

"Almost certainly the girl."

"Why?"

Drake glanced uncomfortably at Rachel. "I'm not sure we should confess why, charm woman. It could place you in greater danger."

The woman laughed, quick and loud. "I could not be in greater danger. The emperor has hunted me for years. You have brought a torivor to my threshold. Speak candidly. The more I know, the better I can help."

"The girl is a Beyonder," Drake said. "She knows all of the syllables of a word that can unmake Maldor."

The woman regarded Rachel with new interest. "I know of this word. You have all of it?"

"Yes," Rachel said. "So did my friend Jason, another Beyonder. He has been captured by Maldor, but it doesn't seem like he's had a chance to use the Word."

"He could be dead," the charm woman said.

Tears clouded Rachel's vision. "He could be."

"Though I expect that he lives," Drake inserted. "He rang the gong and was admitted to Felrook. Maldor has never been quick to dispose of a significant enemy once captured."

"You were close to this other Beyonder?" the charm woman asked Rachel tenderly.

"We became close," she said, trying to bridle her emotions. She had cried enough over Jason. There was no need to make a scene in front of a stranger. "I didn't know him in the Beyond. I met him here."

"By what power did you cross over from the Beyond?" the woman asked. "Most of the ways have long been closed."

Rachel explained how she had followed a butterfly through a natural stone arch and how she had entered Lyrian near the cabin of a spellweaver named Erinda, on the same day the solitary woman had died. Rachel also mentioned how the Blind King suspected that Erinda had summoned her.

"Intriguing," the woman said. "Erinda was a former apprentice of mine. I have long wondered what became of her. She always displayed a profound interest in the Beyond. You have acquired an Edomic key word. Have you any experience speaking Edomic?"

Rachel blinked. "A little."

"The girl can call fire," Drake specified.

"Indeed?" The woman licked her lips, her gaze becoming more intent. "Who taught you this secret?"

Rachel glanced at Drake.

"I did," he said.

"What business does a member of the Amar Kabal have speaking Edomic?" the woman challenged.

"I'm an exile," Drake replied. "I've dabbled in many pursuits uncommon among my people."

"You know the prophecy," the woman pressed. "When the People of the Seed grow familiar with Edomic, their downfall will have commenced."

Drake flashed his crooked grin. "I'm no longer among my people. I prefer to conclude that I don't count. Besides, anyone can see that our downfall has begun. We might as well go down fighting."

"Perhaps," the charm woman mused, stroking her chin, the liver-spotted hand incongruent against the more youthful skin of her face. "Prophecies aside, the wizardborn normally show little aptitude for Edomic."

"I'm no spellweaver," Drake huffed. "It doesn't come easily. I know a few practical tricks."

"How long did it take her to learn?"

"She saw me call heat to light a campfire one evening. She asked how I did it, and I told her. She lit a candle that same night."

"The same night?" The charm woman gasped. "How long did it take you to light your first candle, Drake?"

"Years of practice. She clearly has an unusual aptitude."

The woman fixed Rachel with a suspicious stare. "Where did you study Edomic before?"

"Nowhere," Rachel replied. "Never. I know the syllables to the word that can kill Maldor. Otherwise, the first Edomic words I heard came from Drake."

"This was how long ago?"

"A couple of weeks."

"You can light a candle whenever you choose?"

"Pretty much."

"Show me." The charm woman arose, collected a long reddish candle, handed it to Rachel, and returned to her stool.

"Now?"



“At your pleasure.”

Rachel felt a mild surge of stage fright. She hadn't done this trick under such scrutiny. The woman had made it sound like lighting a candle with Edomic should have been difficult to learn. The skeptical attitude magnified Rachel's nervousness. She took a breath. She had done this hundreds of times. She spoke the words, focused on the wick, and a flame flickered into being.

“Remarkable,” the charm woman said. “Blow it out.” She gestured at Drake. “Take the candle to the other side of the room.”

Rachel handed him the candle, and he carried it to the opposite side of the tent.

“Light it,” the charm woman ordered.

“I've never tried this from so far away,” Rachel explained.

“Same idea,” the woman said. “Will heat to the wick.”

Rachel said the words, concentrating on the wick. She could feel an inexplicable resistance, like the first time she had tried to use Edomic to light a candle. Her attention began to waver, as if some distractive force were willing her eyes away from her target, but she redoubled her effort, pushing mentally, and whispered the words again. Across the room, a new flame was born.

“That was harder,” Rachel said, wiping perspiration from her forehead.

The charm woman considered Rachel curiously. “Yet you made it look relatively effortless.” The woman looked at Drake. “What are the chances of Rachel remaining with me as an apprentice?”

“You would have to ask her,” he replied with a slight frown.

“Well?” the woman asked.

Rachel felt flustered and flattered. Did this mean she showed serious promise with Edomic? It would be amazing to learn more, but the timing seemed off. “I don't think I can. We need to figure out how to rescue Jason, and I need to get in front of Maldor, so I can use the Word. Plus, I need to find a way home.”

“I can offer you as safe a sanctuary as you are likely to find in Lyrian,” the woman replied. “Study with me for a year, and you will become much more formidable. You learned to call fire with abnormal ease. For most, those words you uttered would convey meaning only. Heat would hear but not respond. If you can continue as you commenced, you could exceed the abilities of any practitioner remaining in Lyrian.”

Rachel looked to Drake.

“This is a high compliment,” the seedman admitted. “The charm woman would not make this invitation lightly. Nor offer such encouragement.”

Rachel pressed her lips together. “Wait a minute. Is this why you really brought me here? To see if she thought I could become a wizard?”

Drake shrugged innocently. “I was interested in her opinion regarding your aptitude. And we needed to lose the lurker. Both needs aligned.”

“Only one person in Lyrian could help you become a true wizard,” the charm woman said, “but Maldor does not take apprentices. He crushes any who aspire to learn Edomic. Our best lore on the subject has been lost. Only scant fragments of what we once knew are preserved by stragglers like myself. Still, there is much I could teach you.”

“What do you think?” Rachel asked Drake.

“You are in a difficult situation,” the seedman replied. “Maldor wants to apprehend you more than any rebel in recent memory. The torivor proves that. You hope to return to the Beyond, but we have no idea how. You wish to rescue Jason, but we currently lack any realistic chance of accomplishing that as well. Alternatively, if you could arm yourself with greater power ... who knows what options the future might hold?”

Rachel bowed her head. To agree to study with the charm woman would mean admitting some uncomfortable things. It meant that Jason would be in Felrook for a long time. It meant that she would remain in Lyrian for a long time. In fact, an apprenticeship like they were discussing might be the first step toward admitting she would remain in Lyrian for the rest of her life.

But wasn't that just accepting the reality of her situation? Jason had been captured. He might be dead. Nobody knew of a way back to the Beyond. The emperor was out of reach. Whether or not Rachel studied Edomic, she was in serious trouble. Her options were limited. If this woman could provide a safe haven while empowering her to have a better chance of surviving on her own, shouldn't she seize the opportunity?

Besides, wasn't she curious to learn what else she might be able to do using Edomic? If lighting a candle brought an exultant thrill, how would it feel when she mastered more ambitious abilities? Didn't she crave the rush that came when a few words supported by her will set the forces of nature in motion?

Rachel wrung her hands. Did she want to study Edomic? Absolutely. Maybe too much. Maybe so much that all the other reasons she had in mind were really just excuses.

“Would you stay with me?” Rachel asked Drake.

“If the charm woman would allow it,” he replied.

The woman laughed. "You have changed, Drake. You are completely committed to the welfare of this girl?"

"My seed went bad," he said evenly, rubbing the back of his neck. "This is my final lifetime. I have wasted many. I can think of no finer way to spend it than helping Rachel destroy Maldor. She and the word she possesses represent the best chance we have."

"In that case, I invite you to remain with us throughout her apprenticeship." The charm woman studied Rachel. "There are limits to what I can teach you. Most of my skill is with charms. Such spells require time and patience to weave, along with certain specific Edomic aptitudes that I have not found in another. For all we know, your chief aptitude could involve summoning heat. Only time will tell how far you can take that ability and what else you can learn. But I can certainly teach you some new phrases, help you hone your talents, and advise you about the dangers of Edomic."

"Dangers?"

The woman snorted. "The danger mounts as your ability grows. In short, it is simplest and safest to use Edomic to accomplish tasks you could perform without Edomic. Lighting the candle is a good example. Given the right materials, you could ignite a candle on your own with little difficulty. Edomic is simply more convenient. If you fail to summon a candle flame with Edomic, the modest amount of energy involved tends to dissipate harmlessly.

"However, if you were trying to summon enough fire to consume a haystack all at once, considerably more energy would be in play. If you lost control of that much energy, unintended targets could ignite, including yourself. Also, should an ambitious command go awry, the failed effort could damage your mind, perhaps even permanently crippling your consciousness. There can be numerous unhappy consequences when a significant amount of power is involved."

"Which is why I keep my commands simple," Drake muttered.

"A prudent policy," the woman agreed.

"It was harder to light the candle when it was across the room," Rachel noted. "I had to say the words twice."

"Many factors, including distance, can complicate an Edomic command. Repeating the Edomic words seldom achieves the desired benefit, except perhaps by serving as a crutch to help your mind urge the heat to carry out your command. Once you have spoken, exert your will to demand compliance."

"It's weird to think of arguing with heat," Rachel said.

“Not arguing like you would with Drake,” the charm woman clarified. “The heat has no intellect comparable to you or me, but it does comprehend Edomic. Ages ago, this world was created by the great master of this language. Edomic is equally understood by matter, energy, and intelligence. Even so, as you have begun to discover, it is one thing for the heat to comprehend your intent and another for it to obey.”

Rachel scrunched her brow. “I sort of have to push with my mind to get the candle to light. It’s hard to explain.”

“Very hard to explain,” the woman echoed. “In the past, scholars have sought to master Edomic as a form of communication. This is what many would call the lower use of Edomic. The higher use of Edomic is to speak with sufficient authority that matter and energy comply. Some, especially the uninformed, call it magic. Call it what you like. While scholars communicated, wizards commanded.”

“What’s the difference?” Rachel asked. “What made the wizards special?”

The woman shrugged. “None have found a satisfactory answer. Certainly not a teachable one. It has much to do with the will of the speaker. It also has something to do with faith, intelligence, experience, passion, courage, imagination, determination, and many other attributes. Commanding with Edomic also seems to rely on an innate, prerequisite gift that only a few possess. With effort, most could learn to speak at least some Edomic. But no amount of study can elevate a person from speaking to commanding. While training can increase the gift to command with Edomic, apparently nothing can create the raw ability.”

“And I have it,” Rachel said softly.

“You certainly do,” the woman affirmed. “Do you intend to learn more? Will you tarry with me for a season to explore your potential?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. “I’ll do my best.” She glanced at Drake, who gave a nod of approval.

“Very well,” the charm woman said, clearly pleased. “Our first order of business must be to divert the torivor. In order for you to remain with me, we will have to part ways.”

“What do you mean?”

“The charms that protect me from torivors and other servants of the emperor work mostly on principles of avoidance and misdirection. They won’t long protect me or anyone else against intense scrutiny. For all of our sakes, we must mislead the torivor.”

“How will that work?” Rachel wondered.  
The charm woman winked. “Watch and learn.”

# LURKER

Jason hiked along a gray beach of smooth, rounded pebbles. The stones magnified the crashing rumble as waves pounded the shore, and shifted underfoot with each step, rattling softly. Ahead, a wide creek crossed his path, emptying into the sea.

When he reached the creek, Jason knelt and filled his canteen, then took a long drink. Breathing deeply of the salt-tinged air, he rubbed his tired eyes. He had reached the beach yesterday morning, but had slept only briefly last night, thanks to the nightmare that had instantly overwhelmed him. He had been riding a roller coaster when a massive tornado touched down at the theme park. Everything had gone horribly wrong and had felt horrifyingly real.

So he had continued east along the northern rim of the peninsula by moonlight, then through sunrise, then under the full light of day. In a few hours, night would fall again. Jason knew he would have to try to sleep, but tired as he felt, he doubted whether he would rest.

He looked back at the featureless creature, standing silently on the stones. Mr. No Comment—the silent invader of his dreams. Jason had looked back many times while moving along the stony beach. Not a single pebble clicked or clacked as the dark figure trod over them.

Jason removed his boots and socks, rolled up his jeans, and waded across the cold creek. The dark figure did not follow. Jason sat on the far side and let his feet get mostly dry before putting his socks and boots back on.

He marched away, glancing back at the dark figure. Soon the creature was more than a hundred yards behind, and it still did not follow. Was it intimidated by water? They had crossed streams before, but nothing as wide as this creek.

Peering ahead, Jason realized that the seaside stones were getting bigger. Soon the rocky beach would become too treacherous for walking quickly, so he decided to parallel it slightly inland. He glanced back toward the creek, and was startled to find the black figure standing less than ten paces behind.

How long had he looked away? Four or five seconds? Maybe six? This thing was fast. It had traversed the creek and dashed across at least a hundred yards of pebbly beach without a sound. "Are you showing off?" Jason asked.

The expressionless figure supplied no explanation.

After he'd skirted the rocky coastline for an hour or so, the stones dissolved into speckled pink sand, and Jason returned from the scrubby inland undergrowth to the beach. Occasional boulders interrupted the shoreline: tortured shapes pocked with irregular holes. Leafy ropes of translucent seaweed lay strewn across his path in haphazard piles. Spoon-billed shorebirds scuttled in the shallows, taking flight as breakers disturbed their foraging. Colorful fragments of broken shells littered the sand near the water, sometimes crunching under Jason's boots.

Back in America, this sandy stretch would have been a popular vacation spot or else coveted real estate for beach houses. He could visualize little kids piling sand while their older siblings rode boogie boards and their parents sorted snacks under big umbrellas.

Jason continued along the mildly curving beach. Up ahead, a village came into view, situated on a gentle rise not far from the shore. A palisade of upright logs surrounded the settlement, the wood bleached by sun and wind and salt. The village contained perhaps thirty residences, along with a few larger buildings. He felt relieved to see an actual community of people. It made him feel less lost. Too small to be Ithilum, the seaside settlement lacked a real dock, although several small fishing boats huddled in a nearby cove, sheltered by a man-made breakwater.

Leaning against a misshapen boulder, Jason paused to survey the little village. Smoke drifted up from a few chimneys. Somewhere a dog barked.

Jason folded his arms. His eyes itched. He had skipped sleeping his first night in Lyrian and had mostly skipped sleeping last night as well. His food was running out, and he wanted something besides granola. Watching the village, it was hard not to picture beds and warm food.

Towns in Lyrian had routinely brought him bad luck. The people here distrusted strangers, and Jason doubted his wraithlike companion would earn him any extra goodwill. But the village would have resources, and Tark had given him plenty of money.

While weighing whether to visit the village, Jason eyed the boats in the sheltered cove, then glanced at his shadowy escort. The dark figure had hesitated to cross the creek. What if Jason bought passage to Ithilum by boat?

Wasn't it possible that traveling over the water could help him ditch the creature? As a bonus, he'd probably reach his destination faster, and he'd get a break from walking. Even if booking such a voyage was irregular, he figured that enough money would inevitably convince some poor fisherman to help him out.

The more he pondered the idea, the better he liked it. If the reaction of the giants had been any indicator, the dark creature following him would probably keep anyone in the village from messing with him. Maybe somebody could confirm whether the entity was a lurker. Or maybe he would get lucky and the creature would simply wait outside the palisade.

Jason started toward the walled settlement. He noticed a few men on the shore near the cove, fussing with large nets. A dirt road meandered from the seaside to a wooden gate in the palisade. Jason approached the entrance, the dark figure less than its typical ten paces behind. A pair of huge white fish jaws gaped at either side of the closed gate, showing jagged triangular teeth. Both sets of jaws appeared large enough to swallow a human whole. Or bite one in half.

Jason neared the gate, which was lower than the rest of the wall. A small wooden guardhouse stood on stilts behind one side of the gate.

"Hello?" Jason inquired.

An older man with bushy sideburns appeared in the guardhouse window. He glanced at Jason, then gaped at the dark figure standing behind him. "What evil walks with you?"

Jason glanced over his shoulder, acting startled. "Yikes! You know, I'm not sure. We're not together."

The man gave Jason a skeptical stare.

Jason peeked over his shoulder again, as if nervous and perplexed. He looked up at the man. "I don't like the look of him. Mind letting me in?"

"Please, pass us by," the man asked, eyes on the shadowy figure. "We're simple folk."

"He isn't with me," Jason insisted. "I assumed he was a local. How about you just open up a little so I can squeeze through?"

"Don't share your doom with our community," the man implored.

"Sorry, I need to come inside. Orders from the underworld."

The man vanished from the window. A bell atop the guardhouse clanged three times, then three times again, then a final three times. Jason heard the man dashing away from the gate, shouting hoarsely. "Run! Hide! Death stands at the gates! Get inside! Bolt your windows! Barricade your doors!"



The gate was only about seven feet high. Jason hesitated. He was clearly unwanted. But the gatekeeper had looked terrified—much too frightened to make trouble. Surely Jason could find some intimidated villager willing to sell provisions. Maybe even somebody to sail him to Ithilum.

Jason climbed the gate without any trouble. He backed away, curious to see how the dark figure would handle the obstacle. It remained outside the gate as Jason walked backward. Jason turned away, then whipped around in time to see the shadowy apparition landing on the ground inside the gate. Jason pointed at the figure. “I saw that. Part of it, anyway. Nice jump.”

Turning, Jason directed his attention to the village. The buildings were constructed from weathered wood accented by the same rounded stones prevalent beyond the sandy beach. Most of the dwellings had stone chimneys, and several boasted stone foundations or garden features. Nobody walked the dirt streets.

A few curious villagers poked their heads out of doorways or windows, only to hastily withdraw once they caught sight of Jason and his mysterious escort. Jason heard a panicked woman calling to her children and saw a group of young kids hustle over to a small dwelling on the far side of town.

By the time Jason advanced up the road to the largest building in the village, all was silent except for the swishing of the waves against the shore. He paused to consider the large structure. A splintery, faded sign proclaimed it TAVERN. Jason found the front door locked. He knocked.

Nobody answered.

“Open up!” Jason called, banging harder. “I just want to talk. I’m not here to cause trouble. I need some food, then I’ll move along. And if anyone wants to make some money, I’d love a ride to Ithilum.”

“Go away,” replied a female voice muffled by the intervening door.

“Look, I’m exhausted. I’m just passing through. How about some food? I’ll pay double.”

“We don’t make deals with your kind.”

“My kind? I’m not with the creature. It started following me in the woods. I’m hungry. Please help me.”

“It’s too late for you. Move along. Take a boat if you must, but move along.”

“I don’t know how to sail,” Jason said. “If you send out a sailor who can take me to Ithilum, I’ll not only leave, I’ll pay him well.”

No response.

Jason shoved his hands in his pockets. Maybe he was being too nice. “Hello? I’m still here! Hello? Lady, you better answer me. Not a good idea to make the guy with the shadow demon angry.”

He heard a bolt being thrown, and a wide-eyed woman in a beige canvas apron pulled the door ajar, her frizzy brown hair streaked with gray. “What’s the matter with you?” she hissed, trying to keep her eyes focused on Jason instead of his dark companion.

“I’m starving.”

She said nothing.

Jason tried to make his tone gentle and reasonable. “I need some food. Like I mentioned, I have money. May I please come in?”

Her anxious eyes flicked to the tenebrous figure.

“Don’t worry about him. He doesn’t eat much.”

Tears brimmed in her brown eyes, and she shook her head. “Death has marked you. This burden is yours to bear. Go.” She closed the door.

“Now!” bellowed a hearty voice.

The door to a relatively large establishment across the street flew open, and a burly bearded man led out two younger men. Each brandished a weapon.

“Don’t!” Jason yelled. He pivoted to face the attackers, raising his palms.

The bearded man threw a hatchet at the back of the dark figure. In a simple, fluid motion, the figure spun, caught the weapon, and hurled it back. The hatchet blurred through the air, striking the bearded man with enough force to bury the entire head into his chest as he flopped to the dirt.

Shocked by the abrupt demise of their comrade, the other men skidded to a stop, looking from their fallen leader to the shadow creature. Jason stared in horror. The black figure did not stir.

One of the remaining men looked jittery—a stout, swarthy guy with youthful features and a stubbly beard. He shuffled sideways and glanced down the road, clearly ready to bolt.

“Stay with me, Vin,” the other man encouraged, tall and gangly with hollow cheeks, gripping a pickax. “Take the sword. We’ll rush him together.”

The bearded man had dropped a short sword when he fell. Vin held a gaff. He set down the iron hook and took up the sword.

“Get out of here, Vin,” Jason advised the stocky man. “This thing generally stays tranquil unless people attack it.”

“Don’t listen to him, Vin.”

“Are you blind?” Jason asked the other man, pointing at the corpse. “Did you see what it just did to that poor guy?”

“You mean our uncle?”

Jason frowned. He held up his hands calmly. “This demon is no friend of mine. It refuses to leave me alone. If you attack it, I promise you’ll join your uncle.”

The lean man appeared uncertain. “Why lead it into our town? Who would do such a thing?”

“I need help. I don’t even know what it is. I didn’t imagine anybody would try to fight it.”

The tall man glared at Jason. “Our uncle was not about to let his sister become endangered.” His eyes shifted to a point beyond Jason’s shoulder.

Jason glanced at the tavern door. It had cracked open enough to show half of the face of the woman he had confronted. She held a quivering hand to her lips. Tears streaked her cheeks. Briefly she met Jason’s gaze.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said around a lump in his throat. “I didn’t mean—”

Releasing an inarticulate cry, she raced from the doorway to the fallen man in the street and collapsed atop him, shoulders shaking. Jason stared down at his boots, wishing he could disappear.

“Come on, Gil,” the stocky man said, stepping toward the creature, sword raised.

“No!” the woman shrieked, freezing him. “Obey the stranger; leave the demon alone. Help me with your uncle.”

“But—”

“No discussion. Gil, Vin, help me with him.” The grieving woman turned her head to address Jason without making eye contact. “Help yourself to whatever you can find. Forgive me if I do not cook for you.”

The two young men lifted the lifeless bulk of their uncle. The woman gathered the sword and the gaff and the pickax. Jason wanted to express further apologies, but only grossly inadequate words came to mind. They toted the bearded man into the building across the street and then closed the door.

Embarrassed and shaken, Jason entered the tavern. The figure followed him. The common room was empty. Evidently all patrons and workers had vacated the premises.

Jason felt guilty and frustrated. He slumped down at an empty table. He had never thought somebody would attack the creature. Had he suspected

something like this might happen, he would have starved to death rather than lead the shadow fiend into this town.

Remaining seated, Jason rounded on the creature. "What's the matter with you? You killed that guy! He was just worried about his sister!"

The figure offered no response.

"How about you hit him in the leg with the hatchet?"

Again, no response.

Jason rubbed his face. Resisting tears, he tried to force from his mind the shocked expression the bearded man had worn as he flopped to the dust. He tried to forget the devastated sorrow of the man's family.

Standing up, Jason glowered at the living silhouette. "If I thought there was the tiniest chance of success, I'd wring your neck. This wasn't my fault. I never asked for some shadow freak to haunt me. You were never welcome. You're the one responsible for anyone you hurt."

The words did nothing to sooth Jason's conscience. It was like scolding a statue.

"I should have stayed away," Jason grumbled miserably. "I should have known better." The damage was done and irreparable. He had come here to eat, and despite the tragedy, his hunger lingered.

One table held a pair of plates with good portions of food remaining, as if the meal had been served shortly before the gatekeeper raised the alarm. One plate contained a cooked fish with a couple bites missing and some vegetables that looked like tiny potatoes. The other plate had several gray, curled shellfish; a pool of beige sauce; and stringy green vegetables.

Jason sat at the table. Despite the hassle of eating around all the spiny little bones, the fish tasted good, the meat flaky and soft. Jason ate carefully. He doubted the dark figure would rush to his aid if a bone lodged in his throat. The gray shellfish were rubbery, but not bad when smeared in the sauce. The miniature potatoes tasted a little like dirt, and the green veggies were too chewy, but Jason ate them for the sake of his nutrition. Anything that terrible had to be healthy.

Although the two meals filled him, Jason wandered back into the kitchen. He found a pot containing pink chowder. Sampling the concoction straight from the ladle, he found it was the tastiest food yet, and slurped some as dessert.

After finishing, Jason leaned against the wall, feeling sluggish. How could he go from feeling so empty to so overfed in such a short time? He studied the shadowy figure. How would he get help in Ithilum with this thing tailing him?

Tark had expressed that Aram might be reluctant to aid Jason. With the shadowy apparition at his side, Jason doubted whether the man would even speak to him. The whole town would end up in an uproar, and possibly more people would be killed. But what was the alternative? Give up? Jason needed advice, and in spite of the risks, he could think of only one source.

Jason explored the kitchen. One door opened to a cellar, another to the outside, and a third to a spacious pantry with a small window in the back. Jason shut himself in the pantry and sat on the floor, waiting to see if the creature would follow him. It did not.

Jason fished the severed hand from his backpack. He slapped the palm to get its attention, and then began tracing letters with his finger. CAN YOU TALK?

The hand began signing. Jason preferred to write the letters down as they came, to keep a record of the conversation. Lacking writing utensils, he focused on mentally combining the signed letters into words.

*You returned to Lyrian through the hippo.*

WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

*You got all wet and have carried my hand in the same backpack for multiple days.*

Jason shook his head. So much for secrecy. WHY WAIT SO LONG TO TALK TO ME?

*I presumed you were hesitant to trust me, so I waited for you to make the first move.*

I AM HESITANT.

*You should be. But I have told you the truth. In fact, the last time you tried to contact me, I could not respond because I was on the run. I fled south to a different town.*

WHAT TOWN?

*A minor village. I will tell you as a token of trust. It no longer has a name. Once it was called Truek. I do not plan to linger here for long.*

I AM IN TROUBLE.

*Explain.*

A DARK CREATURE IS FOLLOWING ME. LOOKS LIKE A LIVING SHADOW.

*The hand convulsed. Is it with you now?*

I AM IN A PANTRY. IT IS OUTSIDE THE DOOR. I HAVE KEPT YOUR HAND OUT OF ITS SIGHT.

*Good policy with the hand. You are in supreme danger. A lurker has found you.*

I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE A LURKER.

*None of Maldor's servants are more powerful. This is calamitous. Do not provoke it. Do not touch it.*

I ALREADY LEARNED THAT THE HARD WAY.

*Unless a torivor appears bearing swords, it will only attack if provoked. How long has it been with you?*

THREE DAYS.

*It shows itself openly?*

IT JUST FOLLOWS ME AROUND.

*Has it visited your dreams?*

Jason felt chills. IT KEEPS GIVING ME NIGHTMARES.

*It will bring ruin upon you. Lurkers communicate mind to mind with those capable of hearing. Do you hear it while awake? In your thoughts?*

NO.

*Maldor may already know of your whereabouts. I assume you are in a remote village or farmhouse?*

HOW DO YOU KNOW?

*You are in a pantry, but the lurker remains near you. You must hasten to a large town. It will not follow you there.*

WHY?

*They are secretive beings. They have been known to enter remote outposts if on a mission. They almost never venture into a city. Certainly not openly. Do you know where to find a town?*

Jason hesitated momentarily. He supposed with a lurker tailing him, his destination would be no mystery to his enemies. I AM GOING TO ITHILUM.

*Perfect. How near are you?*

I AM MOVING EAST ALONG THE NORTHERN COAST OF THE PENINSULA.

*Hurry. You cannot be far off. Contact me again when you arrive. Keep both eyes open. Try to resist the torivor in your dreams. Expect an ambush at any time. Maldor is undoubtedly moving against you.*

THANKS.

Jason returned the hand to his backpack. Even without good news, the communication left him in higher spirits. He had underestimated how alone he had been feeling. At least he had confirmed that his mysterious companion was truly a lurker. And it was good to know that it probably wouldn't follow him into Ithilum.

He looked at the small window at the rear of the pantry. Leaving that way might seem predictable, but it was worth a try. He opened it and found the lurker waiting for him. Instead of trying to squirm out, he returned to the kitchen through the pantry door. Again he found the lurker waiting.

“You can really move when you’re in the mood,” Jason said. “I think we’ve done enough harm here. How about we get out of town? Any objection?”

Jason scavenged around the kitchen, stuffing bread and cheese into his backpack. He left several drooma on the counter, along with a couple of jewels. He would not be surprised if the suspicious villagers threw the payment into the sea, but he wanted to try to leave some reparation for what had occurred, even though he was painfully aware that no amount of money could replace a lost life.

After exiting through the back door, Jason turned to the dark figure. “Now I know you’re a torivor. No need to pretend otherwise. Can you talk to my mind?”

Jason sensed no thoughts besides his own.

“Come on.” He saw no one as he returned to the gate and climbed over.

Jason tramped through moonlit snow up to his knees. The still, frigid air seemed almost brittle. His hooded parka, gloves, and snow pants kept out the worst of the chill. He moved along a slope populated by tall pines shrouded in white, his breath pluming frostily with every exhalation.

A long howl reached his ears from farther down the mountainside, the mournful notes echoing hauntingly. A louder howl answered from higher up the slope, making Jason pause, frozen by primal, instinctive fear.

Where was he going? Somewhere important. How did he get here? It didn’t matter. Or did it? If he didn’t hurry, he might end up as wolf chow. Or would he?

Jason put his hands on his hips. Why would he come alone into snowy mountains? He wouldn’t. Hadn’t he been hiking along a beach in Lyrian? This was another dream!

“I’m not playing,” Jason announced, sitting down. He stared at the snow in front of him, willing it to melt. Nothing happened. The icy air felt real in his lungs.

From higher up the slope came a distant, thunderous rumbling.

“Avalanche,” Jason mumbled. “Didn’t see that coming.” He remained seated. If he could learn to endure these dreams without panicking, maybe he could

finally get some sleep.

“You should not be here,” said a male voice behind him.

Jason looked over his shoulder and found Drake standing there, taller than he should have been, hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword, eyes black. Resisting his fear, Jason stood and faced the phantom seedman. “What’s with all the snow? Is this the Christmas special? Let’s do the roller coaster again.”

“You are going to die.”

“True, sooner or later. You’re the annoying shadow creature following me. I’m glad we have a place to talk. You shouldn’t have killed that guy back at the village. Now I really don’t like you.”

“You have brought destruction to all you love.”

Jason could hear the avalanche building momentum as it drew nearer. The oncoming roar was terrifying, but he tried to think of it as nothing more than impressive special effects. “Another spooky warning. Honestly, after today, this dream feels sort of minor league.”

Drake cocked his head, as if perplexed, then pointed up the slope.

Jason could now see the avalanche coming, a massive tide of whiteness devouring everything in its path. It was seconds away. The ground began to tremble.

“I get it,” Jason said, deliberately making his expression bland. “I also get that it isn’t real. Smell you later.”

Drake held up a hand. As the avalanche reached them, it forked, devastating everything to either side, but leaving Drake and Jason untouched. The uproarious sound was unnerving, as was the quaking ground, as were the few stray bits of snow that peppered Jason. Eventually the avalanche passed, leaving a bare field of white to either side, all trees swept away.

“Does this mean we can talk?” Jason asked. “I’d love to know what’s really going on. Why are you following me?”

“I obey,” the fake Drake said.

“You obey Maldor?”

“You must be taken.”

Jason brushed snow off his parka. “Why do you even care?”

“I am indifferent.”

Jason stared at the phony Drake. “Are you his slave, Lurky? Do you mind if I call you Lurky?”

“Come. Attack me. You want to hurt me.”



Jason almost grinned. "Is that what you're after? No way. I've seen what you do to people who attack you." Jason sat down on the snow.

Drake remained standing. "You should not have returned."

"To Lyrian? You're like a robot. Do you have any of your own thoughts?"

"I am more than you can imagine."

"What I imagine is a shadowy guy who sneaks along behind me on the beach. Then he comes, disguised as my friends, and talks to me while I'm sleeping. At first he's scary, then he just gets annoying."

Drake stared down at him, face impassive. Jason stared back. The flat black eyes betrayed no emotion. Jason winked.

"YOU! WILL! DIE!" Drake shouted, each word exploding with supernatural volume. Jason could hear a second avalanche coming.

Jason narrowed his eyes at Drake. "Not yet. I bet I'll just wake up."

The snow hit Jason like a freight train. Even though he knew it was an illusion, he panicked as his body tumbled amid the crushing force of the freezing onslaught. He tried to cry out, but icy snow filled his nostrils and mouth.

But before too long he awoke.

He was lying on cool sand beneath a gleaming moon. He could hear the waves crashing against the shore. The lurker stood beside him.

Jason felt less rattled than he had after the previous dreams. He stood up and stared at the lurker. Just like in the dream, Jason sensed that disinterest would be his best weapon. "That was actually kind of fun. I've always wondered what an avalanche would feel like. You really shouldn't have hurt that guy. It made all the rest of this less scary. I've got this figured out, Lurky. Seriously, if you take requests, let's do the roller coaster next time."

The lurker showed no evidence of comprehension.

Jason sprawled out on the sand, then went back to sleep.

# ARAM

Late in the afternoon on the following day, while picking his way along some craggy cliffs, Jason viewed a sizable town up ahead. The cliffs descended to a flat plain of solid rock nearly level with the ocean, pitted with tidal pools. Beyond the plain, on higher ground, the city began. Many tall ships were moored to piers projecting into the water, shielded from breakers by a long brown reef. Some of the biggest vessels were painted a menacing black. Out at sea, a ship with three high masts approached the port, a huge whale secured to its side.

The town itself extended away from the waterfront, reaching a good distance inland. The buildings were covered in stucco and roofed with ceramic tile. Dark cobblestones paved the roads. A lofty bell tower stood close to the docks, its yellowed plaster peeling. A thick crenellated wall enclosed every part of the city except the wharf.

Jason descended the diminishing cliffs. Below, on the rocky plain preceding the town, workers gathered shellfish from tidal pools.

Once the cliffs had almost merged with the flatness of the rocky field, the lurker stopped following. Jason walked on, glancing back every few steps. The shadowy figure stood immobile, flanked by jagged boulders. Between two glances, the lurker vanished.

Jason strode out onto the plain. The entire expanse had the twisted hardness stone acquires after long erosion by the sea. A pair of women, one older than the other, worked in a nearby pool, loading shellfish into sacks, hair bound in rags.

“Hi there,” Jason said.

“Good day,” the younger one replied, looking up.

“What are you doing?”

She smiled as if the question were silly. “Harvesting abalones.” She held up a shell that appeared to be full of living pudding.

“Good luck to you,” Jason said before moving along.

Across the wide plain, other workers harvested different sea life. Jason crouched at a shallow pool, marveling at the bizarre creatures inside. He saw a black thorny starfish, conical mollusks topped with bright tufts of grasping tendrils, and fat, chocolate-colored slugs dotted with tiny yellow bumps. Part of him wished he could just sit and study all of the interesting species.

A loud wave drew his attention back to the ocean. The flatness of the plain must allow the water to encroach hundreds of yards during high tide, which explained the abundant tidal pools so distant from where the waves currently expired.

Jason looked back the way he had come. The lurker remained out of sight. He could hardly believe that he had finally ditched the creature, at least temporarily.

“You there! I need to see your permit.” Jason turned. A soldier was drawing near, walking briskly. He wore the same armor as the men who had apprehended Jason after he fled from the Eternal Feast at Harthenham.

Resisting the reflex to run, Jason watched the man approach.

“Your permit,” the man repeated officiously. He had a crooked nose and stood half a head shorter than Jason.

“I don’t have one. I’m not bothering anything.”

“Be that as it may,” the man replied importantly, “nobody sets foot on the floodplain without the proper documentation. Everyone knows that.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then we have a problem.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve never been here before. I’m just coming up from the south, looking for work. Is this Ithilum?”

“Of course it is.” The soldier stroked his chin, sizing up Jason, his stance becoming a bit more casual. “You wear strange apparel.”

Jason used a planned response. “My uncle was a tailor. He liked to experiment.”

The soldier gave a nod. “Times are hard. Tell you what. Trespassing on the floodplain carries a hefty fine, but if you would rather hire me to escort you across for a fraction of the fee, I might oblige you.”

“How much?”

The man regarded him shrewdly. “The fines can reach upward of a hundred drooma.”

“How about twenty?”

By the soldier's expression, Jason knew he had offered more than expected. "A man who offers twenty can often afford thirty."

Jason produced one of the small drawstring bags Tark had given him.

"Not here," the soldier muttered under his breath, glancing around.

"Oh." Jason put the bag back in his pocket. "Sorry."

"Act like you're showing me a document."

Jason pantomimed taking a piece of paper from his pocket. The soldier stepped close to him and pretended to take it. He nodded at the imaginary permit and handed it back.

"Twenty-five?" Jason tried.

"Thirty is much less than a hundred," the soldier pointed out, "and you'll get to avoid prison."

"I need something to live on until I find work." Jason had plenty of money for now, but didn't want to give the impression that paying thirty was no sacrifice.

"Fair enough. Come with me. Pretend we're talking."

"Why don't we just actually talk?"

"Good idea."

There was an awkward pause.

"Tell me about your work," Jason said.

"I'm stationed out here to prevent poaching. This tideland is an important resource. If any vagrant could wander out here and pilfer shellfish, soon none would remain. The harvesting must be controlled."

They were walking past a circular pool. Leaning over it, Jason could not see the bottom.

"That one's deep."

The soldier nodded. "Those are tide wells. Specialists dive deep to retrieve rare delicacies. Dangerous job. Fierce predators prowl the deep ones. In fact, some of them intersect far underground. There's a whole system of tunnels and grottos."

"Really?"

"Sure as I'm standing here. See those two pools?" The soldier indicated the ones he meant, which were separated by maybe fifty yards.

"Yeah."

"They're connected. Some of the divers try to make it from one to the other. I've seen two divers succeed, and one drown in the attempt."

Jason had his hand in his pocket. He managed to open the drawstring bag and work several drooma into his palm. Based on the soldier's previous reaction, he figured it would be better to pay without displaying his bag of money. "What sort of predators are down there?"

The soldier squinted. "I don't know all the names, but I've seen some ugly injuries. One poor woman came up with a big chunk missing from her side. I heard she died. And I saw another fellow who got tangled with some kind of jellyfish. The thing was wrapped around his leg. You should have seen it. His leg was as red as my tongue and had swelled to three times the size of the other one."

"Ouch." Jason slid his hand partway out of his pocket. In his palm were three bronze pellets, two copper, and a silver. He kept the three bronze and fished for different drooma. "Your job sounds exciting."

"On occasion. Most days it gets tiresome, same as any job. Where are you from?"

"A puny no-name village to the south."

"Seeking excitement in Ithilum, are you?"

Jason shrugged. "Not so much excitement as a better life."

They continued in silence for a few minutes.

When they neared a long flight of stone steps that led up to the town from the floodplain, the soldier cleared his throat. "Well, good luck to you. Now that you know about floodplain regulations, have the sense to stay away without a permit."

"Count on it," Jason said. He held out his hand. Five bronze drooma were cupped in his palm.

"How about twenty?" the soldier said, taking four of the pellets. "You seem like a good enough sort."

"Thanks," Jason said with a nod and a smile. He had not experienced much courtesy or kindness from the soldiers in Lyrian. The small discount left him feeling a surprising amount of gratitude. Pocketing the extra bronze sphere, he mounted the stairs toward a gate in the wall encompassing the town.

The Dockside Inn sprawled along the southern periphery of the wharf, the front door opening onto the worn planks of a long dock. From the window of the upstairs room Jason had rented, he watched the bustling piers grow quieter as the sun descended toward the west.

Jason had inquired about Aram, and the innkeeper had confirmed that he worked exclusively at night. Which had left Jason with little to do for a few hours. In the common room he had ordered some raw puckerlies, a shellfish he had sampled during his previous trip to Lyrian. They had tasted even better than he remembered and had left him feeling very sleepy.

A hammock stretched from one wall to the other. Abandoning the window, Jason reclined in the hanging bed, swaying gently. The prospect of sleeping without having to endure invasive nightmares seemed absolutely delicious. As he drifted toward sleep, Jason tried to program his mind for a short nap.

Had it not been for the music vibrating up through the floor, Jason might have slept the night away. He awoke to a raucous chorus sung by harsh, male voices accompanied by various instruments. His room dark, Jason rolled out of the hammock, shaking his head and slapping his cheeks. Opening the door, he passed down the hall and descended the stairs.

The spacious common room was thronged. All of the tables were full, the bar was crowded, and numerous patrons stood against the walls. There seemed to be at least five men for every woman. Many of the men sang along to the rollicking music provided by three women performing on a small stage in a corner of the room. One of the women strummed a lute; another squeezed squealing notes from a concertina while a third kept time on an oversized tambourine. As the chorus ended, the men fell silent, allowing the women to render the verse in three-part harmony.

*His ship went down in a violent storm  
Amid the booming thunder,  
But he held his breath and scoured the sand  
In search of hidden plunder!*

*When he arose from the briny depths,  
His pockets full of pearls,  
He found the tempest had drowned his wife  
So he kissed all the local girls!*

The audience joined in on the chorus.

*Old Ingrim was a man of the sea,  
The sort you'd hope to know.*

*He'd buy you a drink  
If you shot him a wink  
Then tell you he had to go!*

The women ceased playing and then curtsied to rowdy applause. They moved off the stage, and an announcer took their place.

"Give us another one!" a strident voice demanded.

The announcer, a small man with a thin mustache, held up his hands. "They may be back," he hollered over the din. "Our next participant is Wendil the Fantastic, who traveled all the way from Humbid for our competition."

A scrawny man with a round face, holding a wooden lyre, mounted the stage. He cleared his throat, his demeanor rigid. "This is a song I composed," he explained, casting a bitter glance at the women who had vacated the stage, apparently to remind the crowd that they had not performed original material.

Assuming a sad-eyed expression, the musician began plucking the strings of the lyre and singing in a tremulous vibrato. The pace was much slower than the previous tune, each word drawn out to hang quavering in the otherwise silent room.

*My love is as the lilies,  
Her eyes like sapphires shine.  
Harmless as a lamb is she,  
Her countenance divine.*

"Is this a punishment?" a harsh voice shouted. Several others chuckled.

The singer paused, glaring.

"Humbid has declared war on Ithilum!" added another heckler. The laughter increased.

"Hold!" the singer cried, raising a hand. "Hold, let me give you the chorus."

"Don't do it," Jason murmured to himself.

The ruckus subsided somewhat. Plucking the lyre, the man went into a high falsetto.

*But she was taken, taken, taken away  
Stolen away, oh so far away ...*

"I wish someone would take you away!" yelled an onlooker.

The crowd became riotous, hurling objects at the stage and shouting taunts. The singer turned his back to the shower of vegetables and insults. The announcer hurried onto the stage, waving his arms and shouting over the commotion.

“By popular demand, Wendil the Fantastic Waster of Our Time, will be shipped back to Humbid in a barrel of rotten fish.”

The crowd hoorayed. Wendil slunk off the little stage.

From his position near the bottom of the stairs, Jason scanned the room, wondering how he would identify one person among the boisterous multitude. Aram was supposed to be big and strong. Jason looked for men who might be bouncers. Sooner than expected, he spotted a likely candidate—a hulking mountain of a man leaning against the bar, primitive features set in a scowl. The only space along the bar not crammed two or three deep with patrons was to either side of him. The man did not look very approachable, but he fit the description Tark had supplied.

While the announcer introduced the next act, Jason descended the remaining stairs and shouldered his way through the crowd. “I present another newcomer to our venue, who also journeyed from afar to be with us, Hollick, son of Mathur.”

A skinny man with a long face and big ears mounted the stage, holding a recorder that forked into two tubes. Placing one hand over the finger holes on each tube, he began to play a catchy melody, the instrument harmonizing with itself.

Jason reached the vacant space surrounding the goliath at the bar. He could better appreciate his size up close. The man stood more than seven feet tall. His massive shoulders were bloated with muscle, and a sleeveless tunic revealed thick, bulging arms. He carried no visible weapons, except for a set of iron knuckles on one huge hand. Oily hair pushed back from his brutishly handsome face dangled almost to his shoulders. The man regarded Jason disapprovingly as he drew near.

Even leaning against the bar, the man stood more than a head taller than Jason. “Are you Aram?” Jason asked.

Aram gave a slight nod, his squinted eyes roving to survey the room.

“I need to hire your sword.” Jason thought that sounded like a professional way to approach a mercenary.

Watching the piper, Aram spoke in a deep voice. “You can’t afford my sword, let alone me along with it.”



“I have a lot of money.”

The man continued to watch the performer. “In that case, go wait out back, I’ll send some men to rob you.”

“I’m not carrying it with me,” Jason lied, thinking of all the money and jewels currently in the pockets of his jeans.

“I’m no longer for hire at any price.”

“You were recommended to me by Tark the musician.”

Aram glanced down, making real eye contact for the first time. “Of the Giddy Nine?”

“The sole survivor.”

“They were the most talent this place ever saw. The room would overflow. Is Tark well?”

“Depressed, but holding up.”

Aram’s scowl deepened. “He knows I no longer accept assignments.”

“He said you owe him some favors, and gave me enough money to tempt you.”

“Tark supplied the funds to hire me?”

“We’re working together. Is there a place we could talk privately?”

Aram snorted. “I’m at work right now. Leaving would draw attention. Meet me out back of the place tomorrow after sunset, and I’ll listen to your proposition. I’ll turn you down, but I’ll listen.”

The piper onstage stopped playing, and the onlookers applauded, though not as vigorously as they had for the three women. The man bowed and left the stage.

“My request is urgent,” Jason said.

“Look, kid, if you must, wait around, enjoy the entertainment, purchase some food. We might talk later.”

The announcer declared an intermission.

“You want anything?” Jason asked.

Aram shrugged his bulky shoulders. “If you’re paying. You have enough?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, Sandra,” Aram called.

“What?” answered a barmaid.

“This character wants to buy me a triple order of sand scuttlers prepared Weych-style.”

Several heads swiveled to look at Jason.

“Did he just come into an inheritance?” Sandra laughed.

“Something like that.”

“He want anything?”

Aram looked at Jason.

“I’ll take an extra order of what he’s having,” Jason called.

“You got it, Your Majesty.” She winked.

At a nearby table, one man roughly overturned the chair of another, depositing him on the floor. The fallen man bounded to his feet and pushed the other guy, growling a threat. Faces near the pair turned toward Aram. The big man coughed loudly into his fist.

The pair of would-be combatants looked up, stricken, all anger vanishing from their expressions. They appeared ready to run.

Aram jerked his head in the direction of the door. The two men nodded politely, then pressed through the crowd, followed by a few of their comrades.

“You want to go watch the fight?” Aram asked. “Should be decent. They look evenly matched.”

“I’d rather stay away from trouble.”

“What do you know. An ounce of sense. Let’s commandeer their table and wait for our meal.”

Several people were heading toward the vacated table, and a husky man had already laid hands on a chair, but they all backed away as Aram strode forward. Jason claimed a seat across from the enormous man. There were chairs for four other people, but nobody joined them. The noisy room was not conducive to conversation, so they sat in silence. Aram watched the crowd, paying no attention to Jason.

After a time, the announcer started the show again. A woman imitating bird calls was well received at first, but overstayed her welcome, and was finally booed from the stage. A skilled juggler pretended to be clumsy, stumbling and tripping and flailing his arms, but never dropped a single item. The crowd laughed heartily and gave him warm applause. A man was leading the crowd in a popular sing-along while sawing on his fiddle when Sandra the barmaid served the food.

She set a steaming platter in front of Aram, heaped with fleshy orange strips drenched in a buttery cheese sauce and dusted with seasonings. Jason received a plate holding a lesser portion.

“You emptied the kitchen of scuttlers,” she told Jason. “Expensive items are purchased before they’re eaten.”

“How much?”

“Forty.”

That was a lot! Eight times the cost of his room. Aram was grinning. Jason handed the barmaid a silver pellet. She gave him two bronze drooma in return.

Aram took a bite. He closed his eyes in ecstasy. Opening them, he nodded appreciatively at Jason.

Not particularly hungry after the puckerlies he had relished earlier, Jason tried a strip the size of his index finger. The soft flesh melted in his mouth. It tasted incredible. Jason started devouring the food, moderating his pace once he noticed Aram savoring every mouthful.

When the food was gone, Aram rose from the table, returning to his position at the bar. The other patrons parted to give him space. The chairs around Jason quickly filled up. He stayed put through the remainder of the show.

At the conclusion, the announcer summoned four of the most popular acts to the stage and, by audience reaction, determined a winner. When the three women who were singing when Jason came downstairs won, they reprised their song about Old Ingrim.

After the show ended, many of the patrons shuffled out. Some, mostly older men, kept on conversing and eating. A few had fallen asleep.

Moving to a table near a corner, Jason rested his head on folded arms and napped.

A loud noise awoke him.

Blinking blearily, Jason saw a man prostrate on the floor beside him, an overturned chair nearby. Aram had a boot on his back.

“You know better than to try a stunt like that while I’m on the job,” Aram growled. “Especially if you intend to insult me with such a clumsy lift.”

The man on the ground held up a small drawstring bag.

“And the other one.”

The man produced a second bag. It took Jason a moment to comprehend that they were his. Aram crouched, snatching them from the thief.

“Now get out of here,” Aram demanded.

The culprit scrambled to his feet and staggered out of the inn.

Aram handed Jason the bags. “Is this the wealth you hid elsewhere?”

“Oh, thanks.”

“It’s my job.”

Jason surveyed the room. It was almost empty. A matronly barmaid was wiping down a table. Two red-eyed men sat huddled in conversation. A fat, drooling man lay slumped in a corner, snoring softly.

“I’m done for tonight,” Aram reported. “If you wish to speak briefly, take a walk with me.” Aram led Jason out the front door.

A chill breeze blew in from the ocean. Somewhere in the gray morning a gull cried. There was little activity on the docked ships. Jason guessed it was an hour before dawn.

Aram leaned against a wooden railing crusted with guano. “You have my attention,” he said.

Jason looked up at the huge man. “I want to pay you a lot to bring me to a village called Potsug. I guess it has some ferries.”

Aram folded his muscular arms. “I know the village. It actually straddles the river. It isn’t far. Why do you require an escort?”

“For protection. I’m being pursued by Maldor.”

Aram waved both arms, shaking his head. “Say no more. This conversation should never have happened. In my most reckless days, I never worked directly for or against the emperor.” Aram started walking away.

“Wait, you haven’t even heard the offer.”

Aram kept walking without a backward glance. “No need. You could offer a golden palace stuffed with riches, and I would turn you down, because what use is treasure to a corpse? Thanks for the food. Seek help elsewhere.”

“What’s the hurry?” Jason called. “Do you turn into a dwarf at dawn?”

Aram froze, then slowly turned, a strange expression on his face. “What makes you say that?” His voice held a dangerous quality.

“I was only joking,” Jason said, surprised by the weighty reaction.

Aram narrowed his eyes. “What spawned the joke?”

“You know, like the giants in the woods that shrink during the day? I guess people don’t really know about them. See, you’re super big—”

Aram strode near, towering over Jason, his expression grave. “Who sent you?” The quiet way he spoke promised violence.

Jason retreated a step. “Nobody. I mean, besides Tark.”

Aram seized Jason’s shoulders. “Why are you trying to involve Tark? What have you done to him? Who do you work for?”

“Nothing. Nobody. Settle down. Are you trying to tell me you’re a giant?”

The muscles in Aram’s wide jaw tightened. His glare threatened murder.

“I’ve seen them,” Jason said, trying to diffuse the situation. “You’re big, but they’re way bigger.”

Aram squinted up at the sky, then grabbed Jason by the front of his shirt, like a bully about to demand lunch money. “Come with me.”

“I think I’ll just—”

“Now.” The way he pronounced the word left no room for argument. The sheer girth of his arm was also pretty convincing.

“But I have stuff in my—”

“Not another word.” Aram released his shirt. “You wanted my attention? You have it. Stay beside me. Try anything, and I’ll snap your neck.”

They started off at a brisk pace.

# MOIRA

Aram guided Jason up a series of cobblestone streets away from the sea. They encountered few other people. Jason considered trying to run away, but the large man stayed close.

On a narrow street walled with tall townhomes, Aram thumped on a door.

“Where are we?” Jason asked.

“My place.”

“You knock at your own house?”

“My mother keeps it locked.”

Jason heard a lock being disengaged. The door opened to reveal a portly female dwarf with curly gray hair and kind, wrinkled features. She reacted to Jason with undisguised surprise.

“Who is your friend, Aram?” she asked sweetly.

“Don’t tell me she’s a giant,” Jason sighed. “Wait, no, the sun isn’t up yet.”

The little woman scowled at Jason, then threw Aram a questioning glance.

“He approached me tonight,” the big man told her. “I’m not sure what he’s after.”

The short woman stepped aside as Aram shoved Jason through the doorway with casual, implacable strength. By stumbling most of the way across the room, Jason barely managed to avoid falling flat on his face. Aram ushered him into a tidy parlor, motioning for Jason to take a seat on a sofa. Aram and his mother sat in armchairs. The room did not look like the bachelor pad of a hulking bouncer. Everything seemed soft and frilly. Apparently, Mom was in charge of the decor.

“You have a nice home,” Jason said, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Thank you,” the woman replied. “What’s all this nonsense about giants?”

Jason glanced at Aram, who returned the gaze in silence, tacitly seconding the inquiry.

“Well, I made a joke to your son about him shrinking at dawn, and he got really upset. Seemed like a touchy subject.”

The little woman considered Jason suspiciously. “Where have you heard about shrinking giants?”

“I was in their village a few days ago.”

They both looked at Jason like he was lying.

“I’m telling the truth.”

“For your sake, you’d better be,” Aram said, leaning forward. “Go on.”

“I went there by accident. I thought I had imperials after me. Turned out to be a lurker.”

The little woman gasped.

“An actual darkling?” Aram asked.

Jason shrugged. “All black, like a shadow come to life?”

Aram nodded skeptically. “Keep going.”

“I got to the giant village not long before sunset. The people were all little, like your mom. The houses were enormous, but they convinced me the giants had left long ago. Seeing all the little people running around, it seemed true. They invited me to dinner, and when the sun went down, they all changed into giants and then wanted to eat me.”

“But you battled your way to freedom,” Aram said sarcastically.

“No. I climbed up inside the chimney, and they would have gotten me, but the lurker caught up with me and frightened them away.”

“How did you escape the lurker?” Aram asked.

“I came here. They hate big towns. It stopped following me on the far side of the floodplain.”

“And you claim Tark sent you to me?”

“Yes. To help me rejoin him and Galloran.”

Aram chuckled. “Some good liars lean on extravagant details, but you abuse the technique.” His expression darkened. “Who are you? You never shared your name. Make no mistake, your life depends on a straight answer.”

Jason glanced from Aram to his mother. Neither of them liked that he knew about giants. They were certainly hiding something. If they were somehow affiliated with the giants, it most likely meant that Aram was an enemy. But if he was such a bad guy, why would Tark have recommended him? Could Tark have been totally wrong about him?

“Tark could have sent me anywhere,” Jason murmured. “He could have sent me to anyone. Why you? I don’t think you’re on our side.”

Aram frowned, eyes wary. “I’m not on anyone’s side. I have a few friends, sure. But I have a hard time believing Tark sent you to ambush me with secrets

about my past. You might as well drop the innocent act. We all know where this is heading. Are you after money? Some kind of bribe?"

Jason furrowed his brow. Whatever connection Aram had to the giants was clearly a guilty secret. If Aram thought this was a shakedown, it would explain his paranoid behavior. "You've got this all wrong. I just wanted to hire you based on Tark's recommendation."

"Enough nonsense," Aram's mother interjected. "Who else knows you're here? Who are you, really?"

As Jason looked from mother to son, he realized that they seemed braced for disaster. If he could convince them that he meant no harm, maybe he could still get the help he needed. And avoid Aram pounding him into hamburger meat.

"I'm honestly not here to connect you to the giants," Jason said. "My name is Lord Jason of Caberton. My title was granted by Galloran. I am the former chancellor of Trensicourt. I have been in and out of the dungeons of Felrook, and I come from the Beyond."

Aram smiled and shook his head. "I've never witnessed such shameless bluffing! So you are the mysterious Lord Jason who outwitted Copernum before disappearing into thin air."

"You heard about that?"

"Everyone did, as you well know. You choose a grand alias to accompany a monstrous exaggeration. Except rumor has it Lord Jason accepted an invitation to Harthenham. End of story."

"I broke out of Harthenham, was taken before Maldor, escaped Felrook, and returned to the Beyond. But I'm back. I learned some vital information that needs to be shared, and I left a friend behind in Lyrian."

Aram shook his head, then looked to his mother. "This is absurd. What do we do?"

His mother raised her eyebrows. "Have you any evidence to prove your story?"

"What's your name?" Jason asked.

"Maira."

"Nice to meet you, Maira. I'm still dressed in clothes from the Beyond. See my boots? My pants? Have you ever seen clothes quite like them?"

"No," Maira said. "Go on."

"I can tell you details," Jason said. "I can talk about the gong that grants audience with Maldor, or the inside of the lorevault at Trensicourt, or what a mangler looks like after you blast it with orantium."



“How about the signet ring to Caberton?” Aram asked, holding out a hand.

“I don’t have it. I left it with a seedman before I entered Felrook. But the ring has a gem in it that glows when a certain chime is rung.”

“You mentioned orantium,” Aram pursued. “I don’t suppose you have any samples?”

“I used what I had blowing up a mangler.” He cupped his hand, fingers curling as if holding an invisible ball. “But the crystal sphere was about this big. The little mineral inside glows intensely for an instant before exploding.”

“Have you any physical evidence besides odd clothes?” Moira asked.

“When Tark and I escaped from Harthenham, he snatched some jewels.” Jason pulled the drawstring bag from his pocket.

“Tark was in Harthenham?” Aram asked.

“Long story,” Jason said. “But that was where we sealed our friendship. He gave me these to help me hire you.” Jason dumped the contents of the bag on a nearby end table. Aram and Moira gasped. Even Jason was impressed. He hadn’t laid them all out in the open before—diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and other precious stones, all cut to glittering perfection.

Aram picked up a red jewel, a green jewel, and a purple one, eyeing them closely. “These are real. This is a fortune.” He sounded amazed. “These are meant to hire my services?”

“At least some of them,” Jason said. “You seemed to think I was here to blackmail you. It’s the opposite. I’m on the run, Aram. I’m in over my head. I’ve told you enough that I’m at your mercy. I’m trusting you, because Tark told me I should. I only know you have a connection to the giants in the woods because of how you reacted when I teased you.”

Aram set down the jewels. “What’s to stop me from killing you and then keeping the gemstones?”

“Aram!” his mother exclaimed.

He held out a hand to silence her.

Jason scooted forward in his seat. “Nothing. Except that a lurker followed me here, and people have seen you with me. I know some important secrets, Aram, and Maldor knows I know them.”

Aram grunted. “Then you have already brought ruin upon us. What are the secrets?”

“You’ll be safer if I keep them to myself,” Jason said.

“Mother, step outside the room for a moment?”

“Aram, I deserve to—”

“Mother, just for a moment. If we end up in custody, you may not want these secrets in your mind.”

“Neither will—”

Aram held up a hand. “Enough. Please, just for a moment.”

She got up and walked out of the room. Aram fixed Jason with a brooding gaze. He spoke softly. “If the emperor traces you here, I’ll get treated like you told me whether I know your secrets or not. I want to know how dangerous your knowledge is.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Have you ever heard of an Edomic key word that can destroy Maldor?”

“Vague rumors,” Aram said. “I never investigated the claim.”

“I learned the Word,” Jason said. “I had help from Galloran and a few others. The syllables were scattered all over Lyrian. I said the Word to Maldor, and it didn’t work. I learned that the Word was actually an elaborate fraud meant to sidetrack his worst enemies. I need to share what I learned with those who helped me, so others don’t waste their time.”

Aram shifted uncomfortably. “You swear this is true?”

Jason crossed his heart with his finger. “I’m probably the most wanted person in Lyrian.”

Aram bowed his head. After a moment he looked up. “You have really met Galloran? The true heir to Trensicourt? You know where to find him?”

“I’m going to Potsug to meet up with him and Tark. And to find my friend, another Beyonder who got left behind when I went home.”

“Mother?” Aram called.

A moment later she returned. “You’re running out of time,” she told him.

“I know. If the secret he shared is authentic, it could not be more deadly. Among other things, our guest may truly have been consorting with Galloran.”

“Do you believe him?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid I might. Could you finish the conversation?”

Moira nodded, taking a seat while Aram arose and then hurried from the room.

“Do you intend us any harm?” Moira asked Jason, her eyes intense.

“No. I mean, harm might follow me here, but I’m not your enemy.”

The little woman exhaled and rubbed her thighs. “Harm will inevitably follow,” she agreed. “Aram and I have done our best to lay low for many years. Your visit marks the end of life as we’ve known it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There have been rumors for years about Galloran surviving in hiding. He truly lives?”

“Yes.”

“You’re acquainted with him?”

“Yes.”

“He is still striving to overthrow the emperor?”

“He’s doing what he can. He has limitations. I’ve been helping him. So have others.”

Moira brushed an errant strand of hair from her eyes with a stubby hand. “It’s almost certainly too late.” She paused, staring down at her lap, then looked at Jason serenely. “I hope I’m still a good judge of character. You could be the answer to my deepest hopes and wishes.”

“What?”

“You see, I am dying. I’m not sure how many days I have left.”

“I ... I’m sorry. That’s terrible.”

“Sooner or later, it happens to everyone.” She rubbed her torso. “Pain has been gnawing inside of me, escalating over time. It began mostly in my joints, and would come and go, but it now fills me, and it is becoming constant. I can no longer keep food down. I seldom sleep. Death would be a relief, except I fear for my son.”

“Why?”

“Aram is a special man.” Her eyes glazed over with tears. “A unique man. We have secrets too, Jason. We’ll keep yours if you keep ours.”

“Okay.”

“Swear by your life. Swear by all you hold dear.”

“I promise.”

“You wouldn’t be able to spend much time close to him without discovering his secret. You had better hold to your word. Aram will make you pay otherwise. Make no mistake, he is one of the most dangerous individuals in Lyrian. Yet he still has so much untapped potential. I’ve been waiting for him to wake up and fulfill his destiny. I know Aram could be great. His father was the truest man I’ve ever known. His father also happened to be a giant.”

Jason clasped his hands in his lap and nodded thoughtfully. “So he really does shrink at dawn.”

“Not as much as a full-blooded giant, just as he is not so enormous as a true giant at night.”

“And he keeps it a secret.”

“Only the two of us know,” Moira whispered. “And now you. Allow me to share a story. Years ago, in my youth, I lived in a hamlet on the peninsula, not far from the woods where rumors hinted that giants prowled. My father was the leader of the village. My stunted size was an anomaly. My mother, father, and two brothers were all quite tall.

“On occasion, I would venture into the woods. My family was overprotective, so when any chance arose to steal away, I always seized it. When I was a young woman, I met a little man in the forest. He was about my age, and hardly taller than me. His name was Thurwin. I had never seen another human dwarf before. He said he lived in the woods. I asked if he was afraid of the giants, and he laughed, assuring me he had wandered every corner of the forest and had never encountered one.

“We began to meet regularly. Thurwin made his amorous intentions known early on, showering me with compliments and staring at me as if I were a vision of loveliness. I was unaccustomed to that manner of attention, and though I acted coy at first, I had always longed for romance.

“By our tenth meeting we decided to get married. He told me he could never come to the village, nor could I visit where he lived, but instead he built a little cottage where we could rendezvous, and Thurwin devised a simple wedding ceremony consisting of private vows. It was all terribly romantic.

“After our secret nuptials, I still lived at home, but I saw my new husband at least two days out of each week. Months of secret encounters passed. One fine afternoon, in a shaded glen, I told him I was expecting a child. He chuckled, insisting I was mistaken. Perplexed by his confidence, I conceded that I could be wrong.

“Over time, the evidence of my condition grew. A couple of months later, when Thurwin beheld my belly unmistakably swelling with a child, he flew into a jealous tirade. I assured him I had been a faithful wife, and I began to weep. After I convinced him of my fidelity, he became very solemn. He asked me to remain with him until nightfall. We had never been together at night—he had always insisted it was too dangerous for me to roam the forest after dark.

“You can imagine my surprise when the sun went down and Thurwin expanded into a monstrous giant. I was not much higher than his knee. In time, he calmed me, explaining that if I were truly expecting his child, it would mark the first time a giant had successfully mated with a human.

“When I could no longer disguise my condition from my family, I pretended to have briefly eloped with a certain traveling merchant. After my tall tale, my

family redoubled their smothering protectiveness. I was unable to visit Thurwin for the remainder of my pregnancy. Eventually, with the aid of a midwife, I became the mother of a healthy infant son.

“Some months after Aram was born, I began stealing away to the woods again, visiting our cottage and other locales I had frequented with Thurwin. It took a few trips before I encountered him. He was overjoyed to see me. I explained why I had been unable to return to the woods for some time, and he was very understanding. It was not long before I brought Aram with me to introduce the infant to his father.

“Then came the night that changed everything. I was nursing Aram, surrounded by my family, when somebody rapped on the door, hard enough to make the walls shudder. My father answered and was struck dumb. I heard a rumbling voice inquire about me. It was Thurwin, bearing a huge club.

“By the time I had rushed to the door, the screaming had begun. Thurwin looked distressed. He told me the giants were raiding our village and that I had to flee. He had tried to divert them elsewhere, but had failed. He had brought a saddled horse and apologized for not being able to warn me earlier.

“Behind him, giants were wreaking havoc. Burning buildings illuminated a variety of murderous atrocities. My father and brothers raced to meet the threat with weapons in hand. My mother dissolved into shrieking hysterics.

“Four giants rushed toward my house, and my father and brothers charged to intercept them. The giants slammed them aside almost effortlessly, hardly slowing to issue the fatal blows.

“Thurwin cried out for the giants to move on, but they came at me without hesitation. Shouting for me to ride away, Thurwin met them with his club. I mounted the horse in a panic, thinking only that I had to save my child. I believe Thurwin slew two of them before he went down. Once he fell, the remaining giants assaulted him mercilessly. I am grateful that I had a limited view.

“I returned the next day, accompanied by men from a neighboring community, to find my village razed, the populace massacred. Aram and I were the sole survivors. Everything of value that the men salvaged from the rubble was given to me. It amounted to enough for me to move to Ithilum and to begin a new life.

“Aside from having a tiny young mother as his only family, Aram enjoyed a normal childhood. But one night in his eleventh year, he shot up two feet when the sun went down, and I was forced to explain to him about his unusual

parentage. From that day forward, he experienced incredible growth at sunset and the opposite at sunrise. We have managed to maintain this secret through all the intervening years, until today.”

“I’m sorry if I messed things up,” Jason said.

“Don’t apologize,” Moira insisted. “I have not finished. Aram has used his size to perform mercenary work at night over the years. He built and ran a successful smuggling operation and has seen his share of combat. For a time, he was something of a pirate, hiding in a private cabin during daylight hours, occasionally pretending to be his own assistant. Having retired with plenty of money in reserve, he now uses his bulk to knock heads together at the Dockside Inn.

“I’ve always known he was special and was meant to do great things.” Her voice cracked, and she paused to regain control of her emotions. “He has a hard exterior, a necessary adaptation given the secret he hides. But there is a goodness to him. I always yearned for him to find a way to employ his gifts for something more noble and meaningful than financial profit.”

Jason rubbed the arm of the sofa. “You want him to join us in our struggle against Maldor?”

Moira pursed her lips. “If Galloran lives, he must have found a way to strike at Maldor without getting caught. I would rejoice to see my son employing his talents on behalf of a man of such legendary character. Since my death is approaching, I will not dilute my opinion. Maldor is a scourge. Our freedoms are already limited. No individual is safe. Once he conquers all of Lyrian, a day not far off, the vise will tighten until all joy is squeezed from life. Even if Maldor cannot be defeated, the only people who will really live will be those who resist him.”

Moira shifted in her chair, looking over her shoulder toward a doorway. “Aram? Son, show yourself.”

A small man with a slight build—not quite five feet tall—entered the room. A loose tunic could not conceal the narrowness of his shoulders or the slenderness of his arms. The face was barely recognizable as Aram—the structure of his cheeks, less defined; the brow, less primitive; the jaw, narrower. “I’ve been listening for some time.” His voice had evolved from bass to tenor. “What use is there resisting a foe as invincible as Maldor?”

Moira faced her son. “Because you may discover he is not as invulnerable as you imagine.”

Aram huffed. “I imagine nothing. There is a good reason I have never joined either side of that battle. Those who work for Maldor either get drawn into permanent service or end up dead. Those who work against him get caught. The smart ones, the only ones who last, shun tasks directly involving the emperor.”

Moira frowned. “I do not have much longer, Aram.”

“Don’t say such things.”

“Whether or not I speak openly about my condition, the reality remains. You know I never approved of your chosen occupation. But neither did I hinder you. When a government becomes unjust, honor is often found among the lawless. Over the years, you have developed many talents that may now prove useful to an honorable cause.”

Aram shook his head. “Where’s the honor in suicide?”

“More honor than attends a life of indifference, idling away your years quashing brawls in a tavern. Galloran and whatever resistance he creates may represent the final hope, however bleak, of dethroning Maldor. If the emperor succeeds, he will soon bring all of Lyrian into bondage, and with his wars behind him, an age of tyranny beyond our imagination will ensue. Among the first to disappear will be the former pirates, smugglers, and mercenaries—all those with adventuresome and questionable histories. Act now, unite with those who understand how to resist and avoid the emperor, and your abilities could prove useful. Hesitate, and you will be destroyed.”

For a moment, Aram seemed taken aback by her intensity. Then he waved a hand toward a shuttered window. “Nobody loves the emperor. We all foresee darker times ahead. But why ensure misery striving for a futile cause? I would rather prepare to weather the storm than throw stones at the clouds.”

“You behave as though there is no hope.”

Aram turned to Jason. “Do you believe there is hope? Be honest.”

Jason shifted in his seat. “Well, yeah. There are still some amazing people who stand up to Maldor. Tark is one of them. I’ve seen conscriptors and manglers and displacers killed. I’ve helped the cause, fighting against Maldor, and didn’t get caught for a long time. After he nabbed me, I escaped. We’ve recently unraveled some secrets that were causing a lot of wasted effort. The information could start a revolution.”

Aram scowled. “It’s too late for resistance.”

“You don’t know that,” Moira said. “You could at least investigate. You know I’ve been fretting about these concerns for years. Our visitor brings an opportunity to move beyond conversation. A chance that may never come

again. I want you to accept the assignment Lord Jason has brought you. If you meet Galloran, my final request is for you to aid his cause, however you can.”

Aram looked angry. His diminished size reduced the impact of the emotion to a childish petulance. “If I do anything to defy Maldor, you’ll be most at risk. I will not allow you to become endangered.”

Moira gave a faint smile. “I won’t be alive by the time I could be in any danger. If I was, I’d go into hiding.”

“You’ll need me with you through your final months.”

“Months? I’m probably down to days, Aram. I limit my complaints to downplay my condition, but, Son, agony has become my constant companion. My only hope is for your future. My only relief is in peace of mind. Grant your mother that peace.”

Moira stared in silence, tiny hands folded on her lap. Aram bowed his head. “I’ll ... I’ll consider it.”



# EVASION

The doll did not look much like Rachel. At least she hoped it didn't. Carved from a single block of wood, it was shaped roughly like an owl, all head and body, without arms or legs. Strings of wool served as hair, dull coins doubled as eyes, and a crude dress of plain fabric softened the wooden body. Most of the other features were painted—nose, mouth, ears, eyebrows.

Despite the blatant physical discrepancies, the doll was meant to fool the lurker. Strands of Rachel's actual hair had been woven into the woolen tresses. Small triangles cut from Rachel's clothes had been pinned to the simple dress. The coins were dimes Rachel had carried with her since her arrival to Lyrian. The charm woman had also employed samples of blood, skin, and saliva.

A goat bleated beside Rachel, then bent forward to nibble at the doll, and Rachel pushed its neck. "Shoo! Get out of here."

The goat ambled off, pausing to tear up some weeds. The charm woman owned several goats, a few sheep, some chickens, and a small army of donkeys. All of her possessions—including the tent, its furnishings, and her endless tokens and charms—had already been packed onto the donkeys. None of the animals had been in view before the charm woman had called, but after she beat a drum composed of stretched hides while chanting a few Edomic phrases, most of the livestock had wandered into camp within ten minutes.

Breathing heavily, the charm woman toddled into view, swaying from side to side as she walked, holding a short carved cane in one hand and a tall staff in the other. The skull of a large bird of prey topped the staff, adorned with feathers and teeth.

"I have the last of my talismans," the charm woman announced. "We can proceed once Drake returns."

"He's a big believer in scouting an area before we move," Rachel said. "He sometimes takes a while. But he always comes back."

"May it ever be so," the charm woman muttered, touching beads on her necklace. "Are you ready to grant the doll authority to serve as your substitute?"

“I think so,” Rachel said. Learning new Edomic phrases was tricky. The language was quite different from English, with a wider variety of vowel sounds and certain consonants that required a nimble tongue. To further complicate things, speaking Edomic felt almost like singing. The pitch mattered, as did the rhythm. Plus, you spoke the language with your mind as much as with your mouth. To get it right required full concentration, especially as the phrases became more complex. The charm woman had drilled Rachel on this particular phrase since yesterday.

“Just as we practiced,” the charm woman encouraged. “Relax and speak true.”

Rachel placed two fingers on the doll’s forehead. After mustering her willpower, she spoke words that essentially meant “you now have my full permission to represent me.” The phrase tasted good leaving her lips. She sensed additional nuances encapsulated in the declaration, including approval of the previous enchantments established by the charm woman, along with a confirmation that the doll was now a symbolic proxy commissioned to exude every characteristic that Rachel embodied.

Rachel had not been studying long with the charm woman, but she already recognized how difficult it was to mentally translate Edomic expressions into English. The English versions always proved less precise, requiring far more words to convey the same meaning as the Edomic, and inevitably falling a little short.

“Well done,” the charm woman enthused. “You’re a prodigy, Rachel. Some individuals have a natural talent for a particular category of Edomic endeavors, but this undertaking was quite different from calling fire. Making that pronouncement stick was no casual task. The doll should have proven adequate, even without your formal permission, but now I expect the lurker will be thoroughly baffled. With my charms shielding your mind, the lurker ought to follow the decoy with full confidence.”

Rachel fingered her braided necklace of bead and bone. The charm woman had custom made one for her and another for Drake. Rachel also wore a bracelet, a ring, and an anklet, all intended to disrupt efforts to perceive her presence.

“What happens if the lurker gets too close to the doll?” Rachel asked.

“The camouflage is strong,” the charm woman said. “For a time, the illusion should withstand close scrutiny. Eventually the lurker will recognize the deception. No illusion endures forever. But torivors do not perceive the world the same way we do. Based on my studies, I’m not even sure if they have any

faculties comparable to human sight, smell, hearing, or taste. Instead they reach out with their minds. Our decoy is specifically designed to confuse that method of perception. The lurker will sense the doll as a seriously injured or partially shielded version of you. With your actual self heavily cloaked by charms, the lurker should have little reason to doubt the authenticity of the proxy. If fortune favors us, by the time it realizes we pulled a trick, we'll be far away and shielded by charms."

"What exactly are the torivors?" Rachel asked. "Drake wouldn't explain."

"He was trying to keep you safe," the charm woman said. "Ignorance can offer some protection from their psychic abilities. But after the extended exposure you've endured over the past weeks, I expect knowledge will serve you better than ignorance. There has been considerable debate regarding the nature of torivors. The wizard Zokar claimed to have created them, and although most who have investigated the race refute his assertion, none contest that they first showed up as his servants."

"Then where did they come from?"

The charm woman grinned. "I've done my best to understand the torivors. Self-preservation is a potent motivator. I've read extensively about them, shared dreams with them, traded information with others, and spent years practicing how to use Edomic to mislead them. Based on all I've learned, I suspect Zokar summoned them. They don't belong in Lyrian any more than you do."

"You mean they're Beyonders?"

"That's my guess."

"I've never seen anything like them in my world."

"I suspect there is much more to the Beyond than just your world," the charm woman said. "If I'm right, the torivors come from a much more foreign reality than yours."

"Where?"

"I don't know a name for it. But Zokar took great interest in the Beyond. It was a specialty. My best guess is that he somehow lured the torivors to Lyrian from afar and bound them into his service."

"How many torivors are there?"

The woman shrugged. "No less than twenty. Probably no more than a few hundred. It is difficult to estimate with any certainty. Lurkers are seldom seen abroad anymore, and they tend to show up solo. During the great war between Eldrin and Zokar, torivors occasionally appeared in groups, giving us our only basis for guessing at their numbers."

Oncoming hoofbeats made the charm woman turn.

“A single horse,” Rachel recognized. “Should be Drake.”

The charm woman nodded. “I still have defenses up that would reveal the approach of an enemy.”

Astride Mandibar, Drake burst into view through a pair of tall shrubs and loped over to Rachel, dismounting smoothly. “The lurker has brought soldiers.”

“How near are they?” the charm woman asked.

“They’re coming from the east and the west, fanned out in wide lines, at least sixty in all; half soldiers, half militia. I watched from the hilltop to the southwest.”

The charm woman frowned. “Lurkers are clever. Once this one lost you, it recognized that you had found a way to conceal yourselves. So it has brought others to converge on the area where you disappeared, to flush you out. My charms are meant to divert casual attention, not intense scrutiny.”

“We have maybe half an hour before they come within view,” Drake said. “If you two go north and I head south, we should avoid discovery.”

“We’re ready to go,” the charm woman said. “This may work to our favor. Just when the lurker is expecting to flush us, you’ll run south with the doll.”

“If it takes the bait, I’ll lead it southwest to the Purga River. After I set the doll adrift, I’ll ride hard to the north. We’ll meet on the highest ridge above Crescent Valley, to the northeast of Trensicourt.”

“That’s the plan,” the charm woman confirmed. “It’s time I uprooted for a change of scenery. I was getting too comfortable here. Don’t forget the doll.” She gestured toward it while mounting a donkey. Rachel climbed onto her mare.

Drake looked at the doll, and froze. He blinked and squinted, glancing from the doll to Rachel and back. “Uncanny resemblance,” he muttered.

“Ha-ha,” Rachel said. “Let’s just hope it confuses the lurker.”

“I’m not jesting,” Drake assured her, crouching over the doll. He held out a tentative hand, passing it through the air above the wooden figure.

“It’s the power of your permission, coupled with my preparations,” the charm woman told Rachel. “The doll is speaking to his mind with more authority than his eyes.”

“He sees me?”

Drake fumbled almost blindly for a moment before laying hands on the doll. He patted it, as he might in the dark, to confirm its size and shape. “Masterful work.”

“The first layer of enchantment directs attention away from the doll,” the charm woman explained. “Under that layer, the decoy registers as Rachel to the mind.”

Drake picked up the doll, shaking his head. “Enough to make me hallucinate,” he agreed. “And that was with the real girl right in front of me.”

“It should suffice,” the charm woman said.

With the doll cradled in one arm, Drake swung up onto Mandibar. “Until we meet again,” he said. The stallion bounded forward at his command.

“Bye, Drake,” Rachel called, sad to see her protector leaving. He had been her sole companion for weeks.

The charm woman shook a rattle and chanted Edomic words. Rachel had never heard the phrases, but innately sensed the meaning. The words spoke to the animals, releasing them from this area and encouraging them to make their own way to the rendezvous point.

“Can you control animals with Edomic?” Rachel asked as they started northward.

“Not control,” the woman replied. “At best, one can influence. You will find that all life generates natural resistance to Edomic tampering. Speaking broadly, the greater the intelligence, or stronger the will, the more potent the resistance. The usual relationships one could form with domestic animals can be hastened and deepened by proper use of Edomic, and communication becomes much clearer. Influencing wild animals can be significantly more challenging, and exercising compulsion is virtually impossible. I build trust with my pets over time, occasionally inviting them to do my will.”

Rachel had to hold back her mare to avoid outpacing the charm woman. As they moved north, the other donkeys and animals dispersed. “So they’ll just roam and eventually join us at our destination?”

“Essentially,” the charm woman said. “They’re all protected with various tokens that should guide them back to me while helping them avoid the notice of predators. I’ve been on the move like this for decades, so I’ve gained some skill at the relevant enchantments.”

“You seem good at what you do.”

“Thank you.”

“Isn’t there an easier way for you to live?”

The charm woman considered the question before answering. “I suppose I could set up an exhaustively protected lair from which I could operate. But I don’t think I’m good enough to keep such a stronghold hidden indefinitely.

Besides, I enjoy the outdoors. The exercise keeps me young. I suspect I would stagnate if trapped in one place.”

“Does it get lonely?”

“My charms are good company. I never tire of creating them. Improving my Edomic is a lifelong challenge. The related efforts keep me stimulated. My only other realistic option would be to take up a false identity and quit using Edomic, which I would never consider.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s fun to use it. It makes me feel, I don’t know, more alive.”

The woman gazed up at her from astride the donkey. “Considerable pleasure arises from successfully exerting your will to command natural elements. Something more than the inherent satisfaction of accomplishment. The thrill can become intoxicating. It can lure the unwary into attempting more than they are ready to manage ... with disastrous results.”

“I’ll try to be careful,” Rachel said, wishing she had kept the thought to herself.

“I’m not advising you to ignore the pleasure of wielding Edomic,” the charm woman clarified. “You couldn’t if you tried. But keep up your defenses against the tantalizing allure. Chasing the thrill of power is a short path to destruction.”

They proceeded in silence for a time, with the donkey in front, Rachel behind on her much larger mount. The donkey showed no interest in hurrying, never advancing at more than a walk.

After some time, the charm woman dismounted and then planted a small stake in the ground, not much bigger than a golf tee. A few copper rings dangled from the top.

“What will that do?” Rachel asked.

The charm woman remounted the donkey. “The purpose is twofold. The totem will serve as an alarm to let us know if somebody is following our trail. And it should also befuddle and divert any who seek to pursue us.”

“You think of everything,” Rachel said.

“I try.”

“Do you have a name? I feel like I have nothing to call you.”

“I have a name. But I don’t share it. My most formidable enemies hunt me with their minds. It helps that they don’t know where I’m from, or my age, or who my relatives might be. It also helps that they don’t have my name. You can assign me a nickname if you like.”

“How about Elaine?”

“That will serve. You chose swiftly.”

“I’ve always liked it.” Rachel did not add that Elaine had been the name of her favorite stuffed animal, a giraffe with a hat and pearl necklace.

As the day progressed, they rode across low, wild hills and skirted numerous valleys and meadows, never proceeding with any haste. The charm woman planted a couple more stakes. By sundown, they reached a rocky slope above a small lake. Rachel followed the donkey over uneven terrain until they arrived at the wide mouth of a shallow cave.

The charm woman dismounted and removed a few items from the donkey’s packs. Rachel tethered her horse and then collected her rolled blankets. Elaine led her into the broad recess. Rachel noticed symbols painted on the walls, and a few crude figurines on the ground. In a rear corner of the shallow cave, the charm woman led Rachel through a narrow cleft into a second chamber.

“I’ve used this cavity before,” Elaine confided. “It offers plenty of shelter to build a fire now that darkness will hide the smoke.” She motioned toward a few tidy stacks of wood.

“Are those your dolls out in the first room?” Rachel asked.

“I prefer for my hideouts to remain undisturbed.”

“Right.”

Elaine piled up some logs in a depression, then added some twigs. “Would you care to do the honors?”

“Sure. I haven’t lit a campfire before.”

“Concentrate on this stick,” Elaine said, indicating a gnarled twig. “See if you can get the entire length to ignite at once.”

“Drake used tinder,” Rachel hedged.

“Drake didn’t have your aptitude. There are words that could direct the heat to gather along the entire stick. But I would rather you used the same verbiage as usual, and simply willed the heat to the entirety of the twig.”

Rachel flexed her fingers nervously. “What if I fail?”

“This is not overly ambitious. You’ll be fine. Besides, if you fully invest in this task, I don’t expect you to fail. Go ahead.”

Rachel knelt close beside the modest pile of wood, eyes on the gnarled twig, trying to internalize the texture and shape. She focused her will on it, just as she had on the candle wicks, but instead of narrowing her concentration down to a point, she tried to mentally aim at the entire object.

She spoke the Edomic words and pushed with all of her consciousness, exerting her will much as she had when lighting distant candles. The twig

suddenly burst into hot flames, making Rachel lean back. She laughed at the sudden combustion and enjoyed a much more satisfying rush than had ever attended the lighting of a candle.

“Well done, child!” the charm woman exclaimed. “You’re really learning to merge the command with your will.”

“I gave it everything I had,” Rachel said.

The twig continued to burn. The fire she had called had not merely licked across the surface—it seemed to have erupted from within. As the twig burned hotly, flames spread to neighboring wood.

“I couldn’t have lit that twig half so impressively,” Elaine confessed. “And I have been at this for many years. How did it feel?”

“Good. It actually felt easier than the first time I lit a candle from a distance.”

“Come with me.”

The charm woman led Rachel out of the cave and over to a little pine. She ran a finger along a slender limb bristling with green needles. “Try to ignite the end of this branch.”

“How much of it?” Rachel asked.

She indicated the last couple of inches. “Just this much.”

“That’s a lot shorter than the twig.”

“It’ll be harder. But see if you can manage it.”

“Okay. It’s funny, I feel a little tired after the twig.”

Elaine nodded. “You pushed hard to light the twig, probably harder than necessary. Over time, you’ll learn how much effort is needed for various tasks, and that will help you conserve your strength. Take a moment to collect yourself.”

“I’m all right.”

“Don’t hold back,” Elaine advised. “This will be tough.”

“Right,” Rachel said softly. She breathed deeply, focusing on the end of the limb, trying to memorize every needle. “Here we go.”

Just like in the cave, she spoke the words to summon heat, then pushed with all the will she could muster. She centered her attention on the last two inches of the limb, directing the heat to permeate it. If anything, it felt like she had marshaled more power than ever for this command, but the end of the limb began to feel indefinably slippery. Her concentration wavered. Clenching her fists, she redoubled her effort. The limb quivered, and tendrils of steam trickled up.



After a prolonged, frustrating moment, her focus completely broke. She simply couldn't sustain the internal effort. It felt like she had taken a step off an unseen curb. Damp with perspiration, Rachel fell to her knees. A wave of nausea washed over her, and she found herself short of breath. As she closed her eyes, the ground seemed to twirl and tilt. She bowed forward, putting her palms on the dirt.

She felt steadying hands on her shoulders. "Calm yourself, child. Let the sensation pass."

Rachel felt acutely aware of the smell of the rocks and soil beneath her, the scent of the little pine beside her. She fought down the urge to retch, and the dizziness began to recede. After a moment, she stood.

"That was brutal," she said, feeling too rattled to hide her resentment. "I fell apart. Why'd you ask me to do that?"

"Do you know what made it so hard?"

"The water inside the branch?"

"Think about what I told you before."

The realization hit. "The tree is alive."

"Exactly. All life resists Edomic tampering. The difference between trying to ignite a dead twig and a live limb is extraordinary. I'm not sure if even the greatest wizards could have directly burned a human."

"You knew I would fail," Rachel said.

"I suspected you might fail with the twig. When you succeeded, I gave you a much harder challenge."

"Why would you want me to fail?" Rachel still felt unsteady and short of breath.

"Two reasons. First, I wanted you to feel firsthand the resistance living things have to Edomic. The way life resists tampering is difficult to grasp until you experience it."

"And second?"

"You needed to learn what failure feels like. You needed to experience your concentration unraveling when engaged in a task beyond your capacity. With practice, you will learn to recognize when you have attempted to accomplish too much. Deliberately abandoning a command early can reduce the negative impact of failure."

"So if I hadn't kept fighting to the end, I would have been less jolted?"

"Correct. Anyone who dabbles in Edomic must learn to cope with failed directives. Little by little, you'll be able to handle more ambitious commands."

But never forget that the more ambitious the command, the harsher the impact of failure.”

“I see how that could be good to know.”

“For example,” Elaine continued, “had you tried to set the whole evergreen ablaze, and had you pushed with all your might, you would probably be dead.”

“I’ll be careful,” Rachel promised. Her legs still felt a little rubbery.

“Using Edomic can be very rewarding,” the charm woman said. “But it is no game. You must learn to stay within your limits. You have great potential, Rachel, but those with impressive native skill often burn out quickly. They attempt too much too soon, and never get to discover what they might have become had they cultivated their talent more patiently.”

“I think I’ve got the idea,” Rachel said. “If I’m going to fail, I need to fail doing only a little more than I can handle.”

“That is a sane and proven road to progress. If you can hold to that principle, you could go far. If not, you will probably perish.”

# SMUGGLED

Upstairs, in a spotless guest bedroom, Jason could not sleep. Fingers laced behind his head, he lay atop the covers of a narrow bed, gazing up at the slanted ceiling. Aram was asleep downstairs, and Moira had insisted Jason rest as well, in preparation for a night on horseback.

The night before, Aram had collected Jason's belongings from the Dockside Inn. He had also scouted the town and found triple the usual guardsmen at every gate, complemented by an unusual amount of patrols scouring the city in search of a nameless fugitive who matched Jason's description. Aram had expressed that he couldn't recall comparable interest in a fugitive since Galloran had been abroad.

Jason rolled onto his side, trying to get comfortable. Part of his restlessness stemmed from Ferrin's hand. The dismembered appendage kept fluttering in the backpack. The rustling had persisted off and on for at least an hour. In the past, Ferrin had only drawn such attention when there was something he urgently wanted to share.

Although he felt painfully curious about the message from Ferrin, Jason had been trying to ignore the rustling. After all, the safety of Aram and Moira was in jeopardy, along with his own. There was no guarantee that Ferrin was on his side. The smart course would be to avoid contacting Ferrin until Ithilum was behind him. But as the minutes passed and the fluttering continued, Jason began to question how the displacer could deduce anything useful from letters traced on a palm. If he was careful not to give away information, was there any real harm in exchanging a few words? What if Ferrin had a vital tip?

As the rustling continued doggedly, curiosity finally overcame caution. Jason had to silence the hand, right? With the sun perhaps an hour from setting, Aram might show up before long. The lively hand would be difficult to explain.

Jason rolled out of bed and removed the severed hand from the backpack, slapping it gently to signal he was prepared to receive a message. The hand began signing.

*I am in Ithilum. So are you. All routes out of town are under surveillance by agents of Maldor, no doubt summoned by your lurker friend. I will help you escape.*

Jason considered the message. With all of these soldiers around, it would be an ideal opportunity for Ferrin to backstab him. Even if the displacer really had burned bridges with Maldor, might he not view this as a chance to repair the damage?

Jason began tracing letters. I FOUND AN ALLY. HE WILL HELP ME GET AWAY.

*Who?*

BETTER NOT SAY.

*I understand your reluctance. Yet I swear I am laboring for your welfare. I have no illusions that nabbing you would offset my crimes. Maldor does not forgive traitors. He would never let me live given what I know. I never had many friends. I want to join you and help you.*

WISH I COULD TRUST YOU. I LOOK FORWARD TO THAT DAY. NOW IS NOT THE TIME.

*Let me supply some free information to inspire a little faith. The port is under heavy scrutiny, as are the three city gates. You must find a different way out of town. At least one other displacer is in the vicinity, along with many conscriptors and droves of common soldiers.*

THANKS. WE WILL BE CAREFUL.

*One more thing. The name of your ally is Aram.*

Jason stared at the hand in shock. How could he respond without giving away too much?

WHY DO YOU SAY THAT?

*I still have my sources. The Dockside Inn has always been a reliable well of information.*

ARE YOU THREATENING ME?

*This is not a threat. I am trying to create an opportunity for you to trust me. I already have the intelligence I need if I meant to turn you in. I know you are here in Ithilum. I know you have hired Aram to assist you. I know the secrets you carry. And I am across the street.*

Could it be true? Jason deliberated how to respond.

*Look out a window.*

The guest room window commanded a view of the street. Jason sidled over to it and peered outside. Ferrin stood below on the far side of the cobblestone road, arms folded, a patch over one eye, a scruffy beard on his chin. He wore a broad-

brimmed hat tilted at a rakish angle. The displacer met his gaze and gave a faint nod.

Jason backed away from the window. WHAT NOW?

*Aram has a respectable reputation. But you will need more than a muscle-bound smuggler if you hope to evade a lurker for long. You need my help. This is for your own good. See you in a moment.*

A second peek out the window revealed Ferrin crossing the street toward the front door. Flustered, Jason dashed from the room and clomped down the stairs. Moira came out of the kitchen into the entry hall, sleeves rolled back, hands powdered with flour. "What is it?" the little woman asked.

There came a brisk knock at the door.

"An old friend has tracked me down," Jason said.

She blanched. "Is he trustworthy?"

"I hope so. I think so. I didn't invite him. He tracked me on his own. He came here instead of turning us in. At this point, our only choice is to speak with him."

Moira motioned Jason out of sight and cracked the door. "Yes?"

"My close friend is visiting you," Ferrin said politely. "May I intrude?"

Moira glanced at Jason, who nodded. She pulled the door wide, and Ferrin entered.

"We meet again," Ferrin said, grinning. He swept off his hat and tossed it like a Frisbee onto a sofa in the parlor. Striding forward, he embraced Jason, who returned the hug uncertainly. Then the displacer bowed to Moira.

"Are you going to introduce us?" he prompted Jason.

Jason felt off-balance. "Ferrin, this is Moira. Moira, meet Ferrin."

"The pleasure is all mine," Ferrin said. Turning to Jason, he raised an arm that ended at the wrist. "Can you lend me a hand?"

"A displacer?" Moira gasped, raising fingers to her lips.

"Have no fear, I have gone renegade. The emperor is my enemy. I mean you no harm. In fact, I intend to offer vital assistance. Does she know who you are?"

Jason nodded.

"I'm an old comrade of Lord Jason. I rescued him from—"

The door to the cellar burst open, and Aram emerged, hair mussed from sleeping, a long, slightly curved knife in one small hand. His eyes went from Ferrin to Jason and back. "What's going on?"

"Who's that?" Ferrin asked.

"My son, Burt," Moira said.

“Who are you?” Aram challenged.

“Is he in on all of this?” Ferrin mumbled.

Jason nodded.

“As I was explaining to your mother, I’m Ferrin the displacer, a former servant of the emperor who went renegade after I smuggled Lord Jason out of the dungeons of Felrook. I’m here to help him flee Ithilum, no small task considering the host assembling to apprehend him.”

Knife pointed at Ferrin, Aram glanced at Jason. “Does he speak the truth?”

“As far as I know,” Jason said. “He helped me escape from Felrook, and today he located us on his own. If he wanted to turn us in, he could have already done it.”

Aram snorted. “Unless he counts on you leading him to bigger game. No displacer can be trusted.”

“There is no larger quarry than Lord Jason in all of Lyrian,” Ferrin replied. He turned to Jason. “I understood you were working with Aram.”

“What do you know of Aram?” Aram asked.

“Only his reputation.”

“What reputation is that?”

Ferrin made a vague gesture. “He was arguably the most reliable mercenary in the business before he retired. He stayed out of imperial matters. He was cautious, smart; a survivor. To be candid, Aram was savvy enough to steer clear of somebody like Jason. I question whether he sincerely means to help. I take it you’re a colleague?”

“I’m his brother,” Aram said.

Ferrin raised his eyebrows. “Evidently he used up all the size in the family. Where is your brother now? He must realize that he could make more money with less risk by handing Jason over to the authorities.”

“My brother values nothing above his reputation. He has never double-crossed a client after accepting a job. He only came out of retirement because he believes in this cause.”

Ferrin glanced at Jason. “Money has been exchanged?”

“A lot of money,” Jason said.

Ferrin nodded pensively. “I can’t fathom how you convinced Aram to commit. But I’ve learned not to underestimate you. Very well. I repeat the question, Burt. Where exactly is your brother?”

“Out scouting,” Aram said, still holding the long knife warily. “He knows about the hunt for Jason, and he is exploring our options.”

Ferrin gave a nod. “The three gates out of town are heavily manned. The port is full of eyes. Clever deception will be required to smuggle Jason away.”

“We’re aware of the complications,” Aram said.

Ferrin narrowed his eyes. “I’ve never heard of a brother. Do you work with Aram often?”

“For years I served as his cabin boy.”

“Ah. The infamous cabin boy. It wasn’t Burt back then.”

“I went by Goya.”

Ferrin’s lips twitched. “Brothers. I had no idea. Can you speak on his behalf?”

“Aram may have the size, but we’re equal partners.”

“Fair enough. We should counsel together. I mean to help Jason, so we should factor my services into your plans. As a displacer and a former servant of the emperor, I can do much to help you avoid capture.”

Aram shook his head. “I don’t work with limb droppers. Help from your kind tends to end badly. Mother?”

Moira had quietly sidled toward the kitchen. Reaching around the corner, she retrieved a heavy crossbow. The weapon almost looked too large for her, but she leveled it coolly at Ferrin.

“I admire your caution,” Ferrin said. “Avoiding displacers in these types of arrangements is good for longevity. But every rule has an exception.”

Without warning, Ferrin dove and rolled across the floor toward Moira. She fired the crossbow, but the quarrel hissed over his head, and he whipped her legs out from under her with a sweeping kick. Aram charged.

Wrenching the crossbow from Moira’s grasp, Ferrin used it to parry Aram’s long knife, then sent him to the floor with a sharp kick to the chest. While Aram scrambled to his feet, long knife still in hand, Ferrin drew a dagger and brought it to Moira’s throat.

Jason stood paralyzed with shock and uncertainty. Aram glared from Jason to Ferrin.

“You have a reputation for knifework, Goya,” Ferrin said. “I have some experience myself.”

“This is no way to win friends,” Aram spat.

“This is precisely how to court allies under hostile circumstances,” Ferrin argued. “I was prepared to be civil. You and your mother pulled weapons on me. If I keep the upper hand, hopefully I can show that I mean you no harm.”

“I’ll never trust you,” Aram growled, knuckles white as he clenched the long knife.

“I just need you to work with me. You and Aram know this city. I am willing to believe you can get Jason out. Unfortunately, a lurker is involved. Even with my assistance, Jason will probably be taken. Without my aid, his downfall is certain.”

Aram looked over at Jason. “What do you say?”

“Ferrin has faked friendship in the past. He’s a patient liar. On the other hand, he could have shown up here with soldiers and apprehended us. He has lots of talents. If he’s really on our side, he would be useful.”

“Put the knife down,” Aram said. “You have my word that you’ll leave here unmolested.”

“Finish the conversation first,” Ferrin replied. “Forgive me if I’m slow to rely on the word of a smuggler. We must reach an accord. I insist on helping Jason.”

“Do you have his hand, Jason?” Moira asked, heedless of the blade at her throat. “When he entered, the limb dropper seemed to suggest you had it.”

“I have it,” Jason said.

“It may be all he wants,” Moira pointed out. “He may only be waiting to turn us in until his hand is returned.”

“If all I wanted was the hand, I could have brought guardsmen and taken it,” Ferrin said. “I’m not after money, either. My services come free. I’ve betrayed the emperor for the sake of my friendship with Jason. My only place now is with the resistance.”

“Tell you what,” Aram said. “I still haven’t arranged for horses. Can you meet us at a rendezvous with three fresh mounts?”

“Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Certainly.”

“One must be large enough to carry Aram.”

“And a fourth for myself.”

“I won’t be coming,” Aram said. “Just Aram and Jason.”

“So the third is for me. How thoughtful.”

“Aram will inspect the area. He’s good. If you’re there with the horses, and no enemies lie in ambush, you’ll get your hand back.”

Ferrin scowled. “I would hate to be left standing alone in the dark all night.”

“You have my oath. Some degree of trust is required. This role is vital. It will fill a gaping need. You will find it difficult to obtain the horses without arousing suspicion. Do we have your word?”

“Naturally.”



“Say it,” Aram pressed.

“You have my word of honor.”

The promise made Jason edgy. He knew Ferrin was willing to lie when it suited his purposes.

“There are several groves inland from the cove north of town,” Aram described. “One has an old well at the center. It’s been in disrepair ever since the water became brackish. Meet us there.”

“Done. I apologize, Moira, for holding you at knifepoint.”

“I’ll forgive you once you prove yourself true,” she responded.

“Don’t forget, you did pull a crossbow on me.” Ferrin stepped away from her, knife ready, eyes on Aram. He retrieved his hat. “Until tonight.” He backed to the door and let himself out.

Aram hurried over to Moira. She was standing up. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she said. “He could have been much more vicious when he took me down. Under the circumstances, he was almost gentle.”

“Lucky for his sake.” Aram glanced at Jason. “You have charming friends.”

“I’m a Beyonder,” Jason apologized. “I met Ferrin before I knew what displacers were.”

“How did he find us?”

“He’s a spy,” Jason said. “It’s what he does. He said he asked around at the Dockside Inn.”

“You have his hand?”

“I stole it when he forced me to return to the Beyond. I used it to keep in touch with him from there.”

Aram opened the front door, checked up and down the street, then withdrew. “How much do you trust him?”

“About as much as you do,” Jason said. “I expect he’ll follow through with the horses. But I’m not sure I want to lead him to Galloran.”

“How would you feel about completely avoiding his assistance?”

Jason thought about it. Ferrin might be sincere. But the displacer had suckered him before. No matter how much help Ferrin could provide, there was a real chance it would end with a double-cross. “Might be safer.”

“Good. Because we’re not exiting town where I described. I’m a man of my word, but I’m willing to make an exception when some limb dropper has a knife to my mother’s throat. Besides, no money changed hands.”

“He’s lied to me before,” Jason said. “It was how we ended up traveling together.”

“Yet he really freed you from Felrook?” Moira asked.

“He did,” Jason confirmed. “He took a huge risk with nothing to gain. It was the sort of thing only a real friend would do. It’s possible he really means to help us.”

“Any doubt is too much when displacers are involved,” Aram said. “We need to leave this house now. There’s a secret back exit. I have many hideaways around town.”

“I’ll gather my things,” Moira said.

“How do you plan to sneak us out of town if the gates and port are covered?” Jason asked Aram.

“We’ll stage a couple of diversions, then sneak under the wall.”

“Under the wall?”

Aram grinned. “How long can you hold your breath?”

The streets of Ithilum quieted as the shadows of evening deepened. Jason followed several paces behind Aram, who had regained his imposing physique at sunset. Wearing trousers and sturdy sandals that Aram had purchased, along with a hat and a brown cloak, Jason felt much less conspicuous than he had in his jeans. Glancing back down the avenue that sloped up from the sea, Jason saw several people moving about. Out on the point of the reef, a fiery beacon flared. Scattered tendrils of mist shone in the distant firelight.

Earlier in the evening Aram had escorted Jason and Moira to a hidden room less than a block from their townhome. He had reviewed several options with his mother regarding resources she could access, including people who could help her and places she could go. He then requested some additional money and jewels from Jason to pay some bribes.

After Aram became tall and strong again, he set off to perform some final errands. Moments ago, he had returned and exchanged solemn but tearless farewells with his mother, who beamed up at her son after their final embrace.

Jason had almost lost it watching them say good-bye. His throat had constricted, and tears had threatened. It saddened him to think that the half giant would probably never see his mother again. They were obviously close.

The farewell had turned his thoughts to his own parents. Sure, he wasn’t especially tight with his mom and dad, but they wanted the best for him and he still loved them. They had worked hard to get him back after he had vanished

the first time. They had to be devastated thinking he had been devoured by a hippo. And they might never learn otherwise. At least he knew that his family was home and safe. With a little luck, he might find Rachel and eventually make it back to them.

Up ahead, Aram rounded a corner. When Jason followed him into the alley, Aram stood several paces ahead, gesturing for him to hurry. Jason sprinted to the big man, who boosted him over a wall before following. They crouched together in a courtyard garden. Aram led Jason stealthily to the far side, passing a pond decorated with floating flowers, and hopped up to peer over the wall.

“Some soldiers behind us were showing too much interest,” Aram whispered before shoving Jason over the wall. Jason dropped to the far side. The big man landed beside him an instant later. They hurried across a road and down another alleyway. Aram led them at a furious pace around numerous corners, keeping to narrow streets and crooked alleys. Soon they stood panting in a shadowy side street that opened onto a main road running along the western wall of the town. A row of shops lined the far side of the road along the base of the wall.

Leaning forward, Aram scanned up and down the street. He tapped Jason on the shoulder and led him across the road. They strolled casually to the door of one of the shops. The windows were dark. Aram knocked three times, paused, and then rapped twice more.

The door opened immediately, and Aram led Jason inside.

The cluttered shop contained an assortment of curiosities and knickknacks. Jason noticed a large trunk completely encrusted with shells. A huge trophy fish bristling with quills hung on one wall.

A hunched figure wearing a clownish mask silently guided Aram and Jason to a door at the rear of the store. Judging by his hands, he appeared to be an old man. He took a sleek harpoon from a rack on the wall and handed it to Aram. From a pocket in his loose, shabby coat, their guide produced a glowing length of seaweed. Aram took the seaweed, opened the door, and led Jason down a rickety flight of wooden stairs that groaned at their passage.

The masked figure closed the door but did not follow.

The deep cellar was a musty maze of stacked crates and indiscernible objects draped in dusty tarps. With quick strides, Aram wove through the clutter to a pyramid of crates in a corner. Winding the seaweed around his thick forearm, Aram began unstacking the wooden boxes, moving them aside until he uncovered a splintered wooden pallet. Raising the heavy pallet, Aram revealed a

circular hole in the stone floor protected by a metal grate. Leaving the pallet upended, Aram knelt, produced a key, unlocked the grate, and pulled it open.

“Down the ladder,” Aram instructed.

The gaping hole looked ominous in the turquoise light of the luminescent seaweed. Jason hoped that Aram knew what he was doing. Squatting at the brink, staring down into the darkness, Jason observed iron rungs protruding from the stone. Could this lead to a tunnel under the wall? Turning around, he felt for the first rung with his foot, then began to descend. Aram followed. Jason heard the grate clang softly as it was dragged shut.

The humid odor of seawater permeated the close confines of the shaft. Jason felt like he was climbing down into a well. He counted more than fifty rungs before he could see light from the seaweed reflecting off rippling water below him.

“This passage is one of the best kept secrets in Ithilum,” Aram said from above. “The owner charges exorbitant prices, so it is not often used. Fortunately, this escape was well funded. You’ll find that the rungs continue underwater, and then along a tunnel. Use them. Periodically we’ll encounter barrels chained to the ground. The owner assures me they’re filled with fresh air. Even the swiftest diver could not make this swim unaided, but the passage has been prepared to accommodate any man who can hold his breath for roughly a minute at a time. Hesitate at no barrel very long. The air will grow stale. I’ll go first, in case any dangerous creatures lurk ahead.”

“Creatures?” Jason asked.

“Aquatic predators. Let me worry about them. You just move quickly, and try to look inedible.”

Aram pulled a fresh piece of seaweed from his pocket and twisted it, triggering the bioluminescent reaction. The seaweed emitted a sickly green light.

“Fasten this around your wrist,” Aram directed.

Jason took the seaweed, then hooked his elbow through an iron rung to maintain his balance while securing it.

“Ready?” Aram asked.

“I guess.”

“Wait a moment or two and then follow me.”

Harpoon in hand, the huge man released his grip and fell past Jason into the water, illuminating the previously murky liquid. Jason watched Aram find the

rungs and use them to hurry downward. As he moved away across the floor of the submerged chamber, the turquoise illumination began to fade.

Clinging to the iron rungs, Jason wondered what was wrong with riding out of town in the secret compartment of a wagon. This seemed almost as dangerous as fighting their way past soldiers. But he supposed there was no turning back now.

Jason blew all the air from his lungs, inhaled deeply, and blew it out again. After another deep indrawn breath, he dropped into the water. He hardly noticed the gentle sting of the cool brine against his eyes as he found the rungs and pulled himself deeper. The bottom of the shaft opened through the roof of an underwater cavern, the regular stonework giving way to natural formations. But the rungs continued.

Within a tunnel branching out from the cavern, Jason saw turquoise light retreating. Using the rungs, Jason worked his way down the wall and across the floor to an overturned barrel chained to the ground. Grasping the chain, Jason surfaced inside the barrel, taking deep breaths. His breathing sounded noisy in the close space. The rich aroma of damp wood filled his nostrils.

Recalling Aram's advice, Jason abandoned the air pocket before too long and continued along the rungs. As he advanced across the cavern floor toward the tunnel, a flurry of motion caused Jason to glance sideways at a flowing tangle of brown tentacles. Although the creature was moving away from Jason, he scrambled even faster from rung to rung.

When Jason entered the narrower tunnel, Aram remained too far ahead to see. Only the faint, bluer radiance of his seaweed hinted at his location. The cave wound left and right, up and down. Jason faithfully followed the rungs.

He came to another barrel, and rose, gasping, into the clammy pocket of air. A few mussels had latched to the insides of this barrel, as had some glossy yellow slime. Jason stayed longer in that barrel than he had in the previous one. He felt like part of a really low-budget deep-sea exploration.

Not far beyond the second barrel, the underwater cave forked. Grateful for the iron rungs showing him the way, Jason veered right. A pipefish longer than a broom hovered across his path. The tubular snout looked too narrow to inflict any damage, and Jason was mostly worried about reaching the next barrel, so he hastened toward the elongated fish. Like a striped pole with eyes, the fish darted at his wrist, stealing the glowing seaweed. Jason reached for it, but the fish arrowed away through the water, speeding off the way Jason had come.

The fish fled rapidly, depriving Jason of the seaweed's greenish radiance. Of course he would have the luck to cross paths with a daring fish that fed on the glowing kelp! Enough light reflected back from Aram to distinguish the rungs, but Jason knew he needed to hurry.

Coming around a curve in the tunnel, he reached the next barrel. Swimming up into it, he rose until he bumped his head against the top. The barrel was full of water! Without the seaweed on his wrist, the inside was quite dark.

Panicked, Jason thrust himself out of the barrel and clambered along the rungs. The tunnel darkened as Aram pulled farther ahead. Jason's aching lungs began to clench for want of air. He focused on progressing from rung to rung at the maximum possible speed.

How far to the next air pocket? He had to stay calm and keep moving. If he proceeded swiftly, he might survive.

The tunnel bent gradually left, then back to the right. He ignored a school of small fish that briefly swarmed around him, glimmering in the dimness. The distant radiance from Aram's turquoise seaweed grew fainter.

The tunnel angled upward, and Jason spied the outline of a barrel ahead. Lungs squeezing, he resisted the urge to inhale and struggled forward.

As his desperate hands grasped the chain below the barrel, a disturbing thought occurred to him. What if this barrel lacked air as well? An image came vividly, his lifeless body drifting through obscure submerged caverns, hungry fish picking at his doughy flesh.

Gasping desperately, Jason entered the air pocket. Eager gulps of air cycled through his lungs. There was no light, but he didn't care. He breathed greedily until he began to wonder if he was hyperventilating. Fighting his instincts, Jason worked to slow his respiration, worried that if he didn't, he might pass out when he held his breath again.

Ducking back into the water, Jason discovered that the cave was no longer much brighter than the barrel. He couldn't make out the rungs, but proceeded by feel without too much difficulty. At least they were regularly spaced.

Jason realized that in the darkness, he might miss the next barrel. The barrels had been chained right next to the rungs, so he spread his legs wide to help ensure one of them would hit the next chain.

He progressed more slowly than before. Just as his breath was beginning to fail, a chain bumped his thigh. Jason followed the metal links into a barrel. The trapped air revived him.

When he left behind the reservoir of air, Jason found that the cave was brighter. As he advanced, the turquoise glow increased until he saw Aram returning for him. Jason waved for him to go back. Aram reversed his direction. Before long the big man swam up into another barrel. Jason entered it after he departed. Aram waited for Jason to come out, then led him to where the tunnel curved upward. Together they rose to emerge from a tidal pool on the floodplain. Cool fog obscured the moonlit night.

“I was worried,” Aram panted. “I couldn’t see your light. I feared the faulty barrel had overcome you.”

A roiling surge of salt water sloshed against them. Jason staggered. The rising tide had already overtaken this pool.

“It was a close call,” Jason admitted. “You should ask for a refund.”

“I felt a crack. The air must have leaked out. You lost your light?”

“A fish stole it.”

Aram blinked. “Hard to plan for everything. You all right?”

Water gushed around them, foaming over the tideland.

“I’m peachy. Let’s do it again.”

“We should hurry. The floodplain grows treacherous at night.”

They jogged diagonally across the tideland, simultaneously heading away from Ithilum and the ocean. The turbulent water occasionally surged as high as Jason’s waist and alternated between pushing and pulling. Once, Jason stepped inadvertently into a concealed tide well. Aram immediately hauled him up.

Before long they left the chaotic seawater behind.

“This fog is our best stroke of luck so far,” Aram said as they trotted over solid rock, sandals squelching, wet clothes flapping heavily. Already the fog had reduced visibility to less than twenty yards.

Past the outlying tidal pools the ground began to rise. The rocky plain gave way to a brushy hillside. Jason followed Aram up the long slope. Scrub oak became plentiful on the far side of the hill. Aram forced a winding path through the gnarled vegetation.

On occasion Aram paused, eyes closed, listening.

Beyond the hill, Aram rushed along a stream up a narrow ravine. Jason had to run at almost a full sprint to keep up. The exertion helped combat the chill of his wet clothes.

Veering away from the stream, Aram clambered up the wall of the ravine. At the top he lay prostrate for a moment, staring back the way they had come.

“You holding up?”

Panting and shivering, Jason nodded.

“I think we got away clean,” Aram whispered. Jason noticed that the big man was not winded. “We’re almost to the horses. A fellow called Chancy will be meeting us. He’s reliable, but with a lurker in the mix, we should stay ready for anything.”

Aram led the way over a rotting fence into an overgrown orchard. The fruit trees remained in orderly lines. Tall weeds and wild shrubs clogged the ground.

At the far side of the orchard, beside a splintery fence, Aram knelt to examine an abandoned farmyard through the mist. Part of the old farmhouse had collapsed. A broken wheelbarrow lay in the middle of the yard, netted with cobwebs. Atop the decrepit barn an owl roosted, head swiveling in the misty moonlight.

“Almost too quiet,” Aram murmured. “Wait here.”

In a crouch, the big man dashed into the weedy yard. When he was halfway across, a figure bearing a sword emerged from the barn. Aram skidded to a stop. The figure waved for him to proceed. Aram hurried over and ducked into the decaying structure.

A moment later Aram reappeared, signaling for Jason to join him. Jason crossed the foggy yard, stumbling over a discarded plank hidden in the weeds before entering the barn.

Chancy stood off to one side, a nondescript man of medium height and build wearing a woolen hat with earflaps. He had sheathed his sword and now fidgeted with a short length of luminous seaweed. Aram had stripped off his shirt. His Herculean torso bulged gratuitously. Jason saw fresh clothes draped over a moldering stall, and began kicking off his sandals.

“The decoys you hired performed well,” Chancy whispered to Aram. “Having that little vessel steal away from the docks was a stroke of genius. It created quite a stir. I could see the commotion from well outside of town.”

“How are the roads?” Aram asked.

“Untreadable.”

“That bad?”

“I did some investigating. Many eyes watch the ways out of Ithilum. I’ve been jumping at shadows all evening. How’d you escape?”

Aram pulled on a long shirt scaled with iron rings. “Trade secret.”

“Wet as you are, wouldn’t be too hard to guess. Not that it’s any of my concern.” Chancy shifted his attention to Jason. “How are you?”

“Alive.” He buttoned his dry trousers. “Thanks for bringing our gear.”



Chancy made an indifferent gesture. "When I get paid, I do my part."

Aram hefted an enormous broadsword. From the tip of the blade to the end of the pommel, the weapon was almost as tall as Jason. The wide, double-edged blade looked heavy enough to chop down a tree. In the feeble cyan glow provided by the seaweed, Aram gazed lovingly at the weapon.

"That's quite a sword," Jason said.

Aram smiled in agreement. "I commissioned it from a master blacksmith. The hilt is inlaid with mother-of-pearl and embellished with diamond dust. The pommel is an opal from the isle of Teber. The blade weighs enough to wield it as a mace, but I keep it sharp enough to shave whiskers." Aram swished the blade through the air a few times, swinging the heavy broadsword as though it were a yardstick. He sheathed it and then slung a baldric over one shoulder, so the sword hung across his broad back, then wrapped a hooded leather cloak around himself. The voluminous garment hung to his knees.

Chancy led a pair of horses from shadowed stalls. One was a tremendous brown stallion with a coarse mane and hairy fetlocks. Beside Aram, it seemed not much more than a pony. A smaller chestnut mare stood ready for Jason, his backpack attached to the saddle.

As Jason prepared to mount, Aram placed a hand on his shoulder. "You should also carry a sword."

Jason hesitantly accepted a belt and scabbard. He began looping it over his shoulder as Aram had done.

Chancy smirked. "That one fits better around the waist."

Chagrined, Jason fastened the belt the way Chancy had suggested. "I don't know how to use a sword," he admitted.

Aram folded his arms. "It isn't too complicated. Insert the blade into the body of your enemy."

"Makes sense." Jason drew the sword. It felt good in his hand, heavy enough to inflict damage, but not cumbersome.

"You can hack your way in with the edge or stab with the tip. We can go over some finer points later. Don't go trying to slice up any lurkers yet."

"Okay."

Aram patted Jason on the arm, motioning toward the horse.

Jason sheathed the sword. "Won't the soldiers I face have a lot of training?"

Aram shrugged. "If you have to use that sword tonight, most likely we're both finished. But it beats confronting your opponents unarmed. If it comes to it, I plan to go down fighting."

Jason climbed onto his horse.

“Any parting advice?” Aram asked Chancy.

The man was leading his own piebald mount from a third stall. “Stay off the roads. The countryside looked clear to the southwest.”

“Hope so.” Aram flicked the reins, and his horse clomped forward over the dusty planks. Jason followed the big man into the gloomy yard, where a breeze stirred the fog.

“Whoa,” Aram exhaled, reining his mount to a halt.

Jason stopped alongside the larger man and followed his gaze.

Shrouded in swirling vapor, a dark featureless form stood motionless in the midst of the yard. Gasping, Jason clenched his jaw, squeezing the reins. Was it his imagination, or did his horse stiffen as well?

“Is that the lurker?” Aram whispered. He sounded reverent.

“Yeah.” Jason tried to relax.

“Stop fooling around,” Chancy chuckled softly, exiting the barn. “I wasn’t born yester—”

Jason looked over as Chancy pulled his horse to a stop, eyes widening in alarm.

The lurker raised one hand and extended the other in their direction.

The horse Jason rode stamped and whickered, tossing her head. Aram’s big mount reared. Chancy jerked the reins as his horse sidestepped.

“What now?” Aram asked, ignoring his restless steed.

Jason could not respond because his horse began to buck. He wrestled with the reins, gripping hopelessly with his knees as the horse curveted around the yard, rearing and plunging. After surviving a few wild ups and downs, the horse turned and bucked at the same time, catapulting Jason from the saddle. He landed upside down and continued into an awkward roll. Shielding his head, he scrambled away from the hoofs thudding nearby.

When Jason looked up, Aram stood between the stallion and the chestnut mare, holding both horses by the reins. The animals lurched and tugged, as if trying to rear, but Aram would not allow it.

Chancy lay spread-eagle on the far side of the barnyard, his horse no longer in view. The fallen man gaped at Jason in horror. Despite the agitated horses, Aram gazed his way as well.

Turning his head, Jason saw that he was sprawled at the feet of the lurker. The shadowy personage loomed over him. Jason rolled away from it.

“Look at it move,” Aram murmured.

Glancing back, Jason glimpsed the lurker streaking away, a dark blur slicing through the mist. He had never seen it run so fast. Thanks to the fog, he didn't get to watch it for long.

"Where's it going?" Chancy asked.

"To report our location," Jason guessed. "Ferrin said the lurker brought reinforcements to Ithilum."

"We must now place speed ahead of stealth," Aram said. "You still in one piece?"

Jason arose, burrs sticking to his cloak. "Let's get out of here."

"What are the odds of me finding my horse?" Chancy mused.

"Not good," Aram replied. "It was spooked and running hard. You'll want to get away from here, Chancy. Find a spot to lay low."

The other man gave a weak smile. "I knew this job paid too well. I swear, never say yes if you get offered more than your contribution merits."

Jason walked over to his horse. "Is it calm enough to ride?"

"She's as calm as we can wait for," Aram replied.

Jason mounted the chestnut mare. She stamped a little. Aram kept a hand on her until she settled down, then remounted his stallion.

Chancy stood up and started dusting himself off. "Give me something to use if I get caught?" he asked miserably. "Some little tidbit? Some secret to trade?"

"Don't get caught," Aram said. "Violent forces are converging."

Chancy sprinted toward the orchard.

Aram gave a soft kick, and his horse cantered away from the dismal farmyard with Jason close behind.

# FLIGHT

A persistent breeze shredded the fog into tattered wisps of vapor. Starlight began to penetrate the murky sky as Aram and Jason journeyed south. Their flight took them across desolate terrain, following overgrown trails through woods and improvising paths over fields and low hills.

Aram kept the horses moving at a good pace, but never let them run hard, balancing the desire for haste with the need for endurance. Jason was pleased to find his horsemanship continuing to improve. Riding felt more familiar and enjoyable than ever.

Whenever they came to high ground, Aram would pause to look back. Repeatedly, he detected no evidence of pursuit.

The night wore on uneventfully until they reached a low ridge overlooking their destination. A broad river divided a quiet little town. Similar amounts of buildings huddled near the northern and southern banks.

Peering back the way they had come, Aram moaned. "We won the race to Potsug, but not by much."

Squinting into the night, Jason faintly perceived moonlit shapes moving along a distant road. "It looks like a lot of them," Jason said.

"Tark wanted you to meet him at the home of a stableman?"

"Gurig."

"I only see one large stable. It's on this side of the river. Come, we must hurry."

Aram led the way down the ridge, after which they loped across a flat expanse to the village. The sleepy town had no surrounding walls or any other apparent defenses.

Even after slowing to a walk, the horses sounded loud as they advanced along a silent dirt road flanked by wooden buildings. They approached a modest residence alongside a large stable. Jason dismounted and knocked on the door.

"Be ready for an ambush," Aram warned, baring the blade of his massive sword.

Jason pounded harder. A moment later a man bearing a candle opened the door. He had a high forehead and a flabby chin. He glanced past Jason at Aram astride his stallion. "Who are you?"

"I'm looking for Tark the musician," Jason replied.

The man blinked in bewilderment. "Tark? I haven't seen Tark in ages."

"You're Gurig?"

"The same."

"Tark hasn't been in touch? Hasn't sent a messenger?"

"Not a word. Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes. If he contacts you, tell him he missed me."

"Who shall I say he missed?"

"It's better if I don't explain. Good night."

"Very well," the man said with another glance at Aram, who did his best to hold his sword out of sight. "Safe travels."

The door closed, and Jason returned to his horse.

"Tark is late," Aram said.

"I hope nothing happened to him."

"We cannot wait. We must cross the river immediately. We'll decide where to proceed from there."

"Lead the way," Jason said.

"I noted two ferries from the ridge, one larger than the other. Both were dark, but enough money should rouse them. We'll try the smaller one first."

Aram kicked his horse to a trot, and Jason followed him to a shanty beside a large, flat raft. The glow of a dying fire seeped through the shuttered window. Aram rapped on the door.

A short, round-faced man with a black eye answered. His cheek was marked by the creases of a pillow. His sour expression faltered as he tipped his head back to gape up at Aram. "What do you want?"

"We need to cross."

"At this hour? Three times the normal fare."

"Four times if you hurry."

"I'll have to fetch the haulers."

"Not necessary."

The ferryman looked Aram up and down. "I suppose not. No discount for hauling it yourself. Payment in advance."

"Fine, but we leave now. What's the standard rate for two men and two horses?"

The ferryman hesitated.

Aram cracked his knuckles menacingly. "If you intend to fib, you need to think faster."

"Ten drooma. A man is one, a horse four."

"Sounds plausible. Do you have two bronze?"

The ferryman nodded. He ducked back inside. When he returned wearing a cap and a long coat, he exchanged two bronze drooma for a silver and then led them to the quay.

Aram and Jason guided their horses onto the flat raft. Jason leaned against a wooden railing. The ferryman reached toward a copper bell.

"Don't sound the bell," Aram said firmly.

"But the regulations—"

"How about you forget this time, and I return those bronze drooma to you."

The ferryman scowled. "I don't care how much you're paying; I could lose—"

"Or I could drown you."

"I'll take the drooma."

The ferryman unmoored the rectangular vessel. A thick rope ran through a device attached to the raft. The ferryman pulled a lever releasing a locking mechanism.

"Ding, ding," the ferryman muttered. "Go ahead and pull."

Standing at the front of the raft, Aram began to hastily haul the guideline hand over hand. The raft lurched forward, progressing rapidly. The moon had just set, and the stars did little to brighten the dark river.

"You aren't looking for employment, by chance?" the ferryman asked.

Silently and tirelessly, Aram kept the ferry advancing swiftly. The shanty and small quay shrunk behind them. As the craft approached the center of the river, Aram showed no sign of flagging.

Near the middle of the wide river, something suddenly splashed aboard the raft. Aram whirled, casting off his cloak and drawing his sword. The ferryman yelped, scampering to the far side of the raft. Jason fumbled for the hilt of his sword.

The sopping figure who had boarded the raft raised a hand and spoke softly. "Pardon the intrusion. I'm a friend."

"Ferrin?" Jason gasped.

"What are you doing here?" Aram rumbled, sword poised to strike.

"No time," Ferrin insisted tiredly, water dripping from his clothes and hair. He clutched a long oar. "Cut the guideline."

“What?”

“An ambush awaits on the far side. Sever the rope.”

“Absolutely not,” the ferryman asserted, striding forward.

Dropping the oar, Ferrin leaped to his feet and seized the ferryman by the throat. The startled man fumbled for the knife at his belt, but Ferrin released his neck and snatched it first. “You’re in no position to issue demands, boatman. Make another squeal at your peril.” Ferrin glanced at Aram. “Cut the line or we die.”

The broadsword arced through the air, slicing through the thick rope in a single sweep. The raft began to drift with the sluggish current.

“Add what speed you can with the oar,” Ferrin whispered, keeping the knife near the ferryman’s chin. “Will you keep silent?”

The ferryman nodded, massaging his throat. One hand strayed to a pocket.

“I already have it,” Ferrin said, letting a smaller knife fall from the crook of his arm to the deck. “Cover your ears, lie on your stomach, and hum a quiet tune. If you see nothing and hear nothing, you just might live through this.”

The ferryman complied.

“That was a quick grab,” Aram said, taking up the oar. “Snatching the hidden knife, I mean.”

“You should see me with two hands,” Ferrin replied.

Aram began using the oar to scull. The ponderous raft sped up and began to rotate. As Aram did his best to compensate for the rotation, the raft fishtailed forward.

“How did you get here so fast?” Jason asked.

“I’m reasonably good at my job,” Ferrin said. “I investigated the well Aram described, and the position seemed less than ideal for a rendezvous. After snooping around, I caught wind of a man named Chancy who had bought a pair of horses that matched your needs. He inadvertently led me to the barn where you encountered the torivor. I lingered long enough to confirm your direction, then rode harder than you could have. I led a second mount and alternated between the two steeds. I may have lamed one of them.”

“What’s the situation on the southern bank?” Aram asked.

“A dozen soldiers lie in wait, half of them conscriptors, led by a displacer. I crossed the river in a stolen canoe to reconnoiter. Once our adversaries ascertained that you were fleeing south, this town became the logical location for an ambush. Helps when you think like the enemy. Helps even more when you trained them.”

“How did the news beat us to the ferry?” Jason asked.

“I assume the lurker informed them. Not surprising.”

“What now?” Jason asked.

“We let the river carry us some distance before disembarking on the southern bank. How are your horses holding up?”

“Doing well,” Aram said. “We haven’t overtaxed them.” He continued to scull vigorously.

“Good,” Ferrin said. “What’s our destination? Does it matter?”

Jason thought for a moment. If Tark hadn’t made it to Potsug, he may have never delivered the message about the Word to Galloran. “We should head to the castle of the Blind King. Do you know the way?”

“I can get us there,” Ferrin said. “So the Blind King is Galloran?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jason protested.

“You didn’t need to. I once suspected as much, but discounted my theory after observing him. He looked too old, sounded too pathetic, acted too eccentric. To think he was actually the famed hero! Felrook took a heavy toll.”

“The Blind King really is Galloran?” Aram said, a hint of disillusionment in his tone.

“It appears that way,” Ferrin replied.

Jason had not meant to share this information with Ferrin, of all people! But the displacer already seemed certain. Maldor had long known the truth about the Blind King, but the secret had not been widely shared. Jason supposed that if Ferrin joined him and Aram on their way to Felrook, Galloran himself could decide how to deal with the displacer. “I can’t confirm your guess.”

“No need,” Aram muttered.

Ferrin glanced at the ferryman. The prostrated man continued to hum, hands clamped to the sides of his head. Ferrin raised his voice. “I suppose we should kill the boatman. We can’t leave witnesses behind.”

Jason began to protest, but Ferrin held up his hand and glared. “Let’s see, I’ll just insert my knife right here and open him up.” The man continued to hum without missing a note.

“He had to be certain the ferry operator wasn’t eavesdropping,” Aram explained, but Jason had already caught on. The raft rotated so much that Aram moved to a different side. “This vessel is unwieldy.”

“You’re doing a remarkable job,” Ferrin said. “Start easing us toward the southern bank. I propose we bind and gag the boatman, then set him adrift.”

“Seems like the gentlest option,” Aram agreed. “You have rope and a gag?”



Ferrin pulled a length of cord and a wet strip of material from a pocket. "I like to plan ahead. Could I possibly have my hand back? If we get cornered, we all might want me to have it."

"Might as well," Aram said.

Jason dug into his backpack and fished out the hand. He hefted it for a moment, then passed it to Ferrin. The displacer reattached it seamlessly, flexed his fingers, then crouched and bound the ferryman. "It's good to be whole."

"You're still wearing the eye patch," Jason mentioned. "I thought it was part of a disguise."

"Sadly, no," Ferrin said. "I grafted my eye to an alley cat in Weych. The precaution provided an early warning when they came for me, but I couldn't manage to retrieve my eye in time. It's still there."

"Unnatural," Aram muttered in disgust. "Many soldiers are trailing us from the north."

Squatting beside the ferryman, Ferrin secured the gag. "We need only concern ourselves with the forces on the southern bank for now. I sabotaged the other ferry, along with the three largest watercrafts in town."

"Remind me to stay on your good side," Aram said.

"There are still enough enemies on the southern bank to waylay us," Ferrin cautioned. "The cover of darkness will soon be lost. Speed and stealth will be imperative."

The half giant stopped plying the oar long enough to wipe sweat from his brow. The sculling was finally tiring him. "You and Jason should take the horses and flee," Aram said. "I can catch up later."

"Are you serious?" Ferrin asked.

"We only have two mounts, and I'm the heaviest rider."

"I already prepared a fresh horse for myself, along with weapons."

"Impossible."

"I work fast. I beat you here by almost two hours."

From up the river came an angry cry, followed by dismayed shouts.

"Get us to the shore," Ferrin said calmly. "They've finally recognized that we cut the guideline. They can travel much faster by horseback than we can on the water. My new mount is close by."

Aram grunted as the oar slogged noisily. The commotion upriver continued to escalate.

When the raft reached the bank, Ferrin and Jason led the horses ashore. Keeping the oar, Aram shoved the raft back onto the water. The ferryman

continued humming as best he could around the gag.

Ferrin crashed through the riverside vegetation and returned astride a black horse. He had wrapped a long strip of black linen around his head several times to cover his face. Aram studied the horizon, where the oncoming dawn had purpled the starry night.

“Come,” Ferrin said. They could hear horses charging along the river in their direction.

Jason and Aram climbed onto their mounts, and the three galloped away from the river into open, brushy country. “Not much cover,” Aram called. “How many had horses?”

“I counted eight. They could commandeer others.”

“We better find a place to make a stand.”

“Three versus eight? Or possibly twelve? Why not run?”

Aram hesitated before answering. “Because they might catch up after sunrise.”

“So?”

“I’m no use after dawn.”

“What do you mean?”

Aram didn’t answer.

“What happens at dawn?” Ferrin pressed.

“This is not something I share lightly,” Aram said. “I don’t have much choice right now. I’d kill to keep this secret.”

“I keep secrets for a living. I won’t tell.”

“I turn into a weakling during the day,” Aram confessed. “I’m half giant.”

“There’s no such thing.”

“You’ll feel differently after sunrise. Remember Goya?”

There came a pause in the shouted discussion. Jason felt sorry for Aram. He knew the big man would never have wanted Ferrin to learn his history. But under the circumstances, there was no way to avoid blowing his secret.

“Very well,” Ferrin finally said. “Where?”

“How about between those hills?” Aram pointed. “The way narrows right where that boulder offers some cover. Jason can lob stones from a flanking position.”

In answer, Ferrin swerved toward the gap between the steep hills.

“What do you mean I’ll lob rocks?” Jason called.

“This is no occasion for a first lesson in swordplay,” Aram said.

“He’s right,” Ferrin said. “You’ll do much more harm harassing them from the hillside. When we get there, gather a pile of rocks in a sheltered position. We’ll place the horses by you. If the giant and I go down, try to ride away.”

“Don’t call me a giant,” Aram growled.

The pair of hills drew closer. Looking back, Jason saw a cluster of riders racing a mile or two behind.

When they reached the gap between the hills, Aram and Ferrin dismounted. “Any objection to fighting dirty?” Ferrin asked.

“Only way to fight when your back is to the wall,” Aram replied. “Come on, Jason.” Jason dismounted. Looping around somewhat, Aram led two of the horses up the steep side of the hill. Jason led the third, crouching to grab a rock or two. Aram tethered the horses by a thick tree, then walked sideways down the steep slope.

The enemy horsemen cantered nearer. Jason secured his horse and then collected more rocks, trying to pick ones that were small enough to throw hard, but large enough to do damage. A couple hundred yards from the hills, the horsemen reined in to confer with one another.

“I count eleven,” Aram said, joining Ferrin in the gap between the hills behind a boulder the size of a minivan.

“So do I.”

Aram drew his enormous sword. “Eleven may be too many. How well do you fight?”

“I’m not bad. You?”

“I’m expensive for a reason. Can you commit to taking down two?”

Ferrin was prepping his bow. “Three, maybe four.”

“If you’re serious, and if they rush into this, we may have a chance.”

Nine of the horsemen charged. Several had crossbows. Two horsemen held back, evidently content to watch. The horizon behind them continued to lighten.

Aram fastened his leather cloak shut.

“Thick cloak,” Ferrin said.

“Better than some armor.” Aram glanced up at the slope and cupped a hand beside his mouth. “Wait until they’re close!”

Jason saluted.

“Here they come,” Ferrin announced, setting an arrow to his bowstring.

Jason could barely hear the conversation between Ferrin and Aram. He hoped he could surprise them and drop a soldier or two with rocks. He held one

in each hand, both stones squarish and a little larger than baseballs. He wished he still had an orantium sphere. This would be the perfect occasion for an explosion!

In the middle of the gap, Aram and Ferrin crouched behind the boulder. There was ample room for the horses to pass between the slope and the boulder at either side. Aram hefted a rough stone bigger than a bowling ball.

Crossbow quarrels zipped past Ferrin as he leaned into view, bow drawn. He ducked back twice, arrows sparking against the boulder, then leaned out farther and released an arrow. It flew true, unhorsing one of the soldiers. Then the thundering horses were upon them.

Jason began throwing stones. The first one missed. The second bounced off a soldier's helm, nearly knocking him from the saddle. Leaning precariously, the soldier clung to the neck of his horse until Aram's huge stone hit him like a cannonball. One rider among the nine slowed to hang back. He wore the armor of a conscriptor. The remaining six swarmed Aram and Ferrin.

Aram hurled another large rock at a charging conscriptor who was bringing his crossbow to bear. The stone struck the horseman in the chest, blasting him from his saddle.

Ferrin had discarded his bow in favor of his sword. Deflecting the blade of a soldier on horseback, Ferrin slashed his thigh. Jason kept flinging stones. He struck the soldier attacking Ferrin in the small of the back. Aram leaped from the cover of the boulder to almost decapitate a charging horse, sending the hapless rider plunging to the hard ground. With a ferocious backhand stroke, Aram cut down another soldier. Losing momentum, the remaining horsemen milled around the boulder ineffectively, and Aram, taking advantage of his great height and long reach, began slaughtering horse and man alike, his weighty sword hacking and bludgeoning without prejudice. Ferrin scrambled up the boulder and sprang from the top to tackle a conscriptor out of his saddle.

Jason doggedly pitched stones into the fray, connecting with several. The conscriptor who had hung back spurred his horse up the hillside toward Jason.

After meeting the gaze of his attacker, Jason desperately hurled rocks at the oncoming threat, missing once and striking the steed in the chest with the other. The horse kept coming. Jason dodged to the far side of the tree, drawing his sword as the conscriptor dismounted.

Jason wore no armor. He had zero experience at swordplay. The tree blocked his view, so Jason backed away as the conscriptor raced around the trunk, brandishing a longsword.

Jason found himself backing down the hillside toward the skirmish. He stopped retreating as the aggressive conscriptor hurtled forward from higher ground, swinging his weapon. Jason swung his sword to block the stroke. The blades connected with a clang that vibrated through Jason's hands to his elbows. With too much momentum behind his lunge, the conscriptor plowed into Jason, and the pair tumbled wildly down the slope, coming to a rest at the fringe of the skirmish. Head swimming, Jason tasted brush and dirt. Blood trickled from his nostrils.

Disoriented from the fall, Jason rose to his knees, eyes darting to locate the sword he had dropped. The conscriptor had also lost his sword, but before he could retrieve it, a blade erupted through his chest, piercing the iron-banded leather of his armor. The sword had been hurled, like a throwing knife, by Aram.

As the conscriptor slumped forward, pawing numbly at the protruding blade, Ferrin sprang atop a horse to pursue the two riders who had held back. All of the other soldiers had fallen. One of the remaining riders retreated at a full gallop. The other cantered forward to engage Ferrin.

The horses converged, and swords clashed harmlessly as they passed. The enemy rider, now headed toward Aram and Jason, veered away, but almost immediately a large stone thrown by Aram thumped against his shoulder, toppling him to the dirt. The man staggered to his feet, clutching his injured arm.

Ferrin drew up near him, face still obscured behind black linen.

The soldier raised one hand in surrender. The other arm hung useless at his side.

Aram led Jason to retrieve the horses. By the time they rode over to Ferrin, the conscriptor knelt on the ground, his helmet off, unarmed but glaring defiantly.

"The displacer who led them, Rogold, got away," Ferrin explained as Aram and Jason drew near. "This is Corge, a captain among the conscriptors."

"So the rumors are true," the wounded man growled at Ferrin. "You defected."

Ferrin uncovered his face. "The disguise isn't working? I should have kept the hat. You know too much. We'll have to duel."

"Your oaf broke my arm."

"Yes, Corge, he did. You were attacking us. You are now my enemy. Are you going to die fighting or whining?"

“You’d murder an injured prisoner?”

“Whining. Very well. Perhaps we should skip the pretense of a duel, since you’re conceding the outcome.” Ferrin brandished his sword menacingly. Then he paused. “I’ll spare you for good information.”

“You’ll get none. Go on, coward, strike me down unarmed.”

“Fine, take your sword.” Ferrin planted it in the ground in front of him.

Corge gritted his teeth. “I would, but my arm—”

“If you had twelve good arms, the result would be the same, and we both know it. I’m in a hurry. Retrieve the sword. Best me, and you’re free to go.”

Corge snorted. “What about your reputation for justice?”

“This is just. We both have swords. You tried to kill me when you had the advantage. Now I’ll try to kill you. Not my fault if I’m better at it.”

Aram quietly came up behind Corge and crooked one muscular arm around his neck. The half giant braced his free hand against the back of Corge’s head and applied pressure until the conscriptor slumped into unconsciousness. “We don’t have time for banter.”

“I suppose we can leave him alive,” Ferrin sniffed. “He won’t have much more to share with our foes than the displacer who fled. Incidentally, Aram, well done back there. You were amazing. Worth every drooma.”

“It helped that they fought like fog-bound sheep.”

Ferrin laughed. “They had no idea they were racing into combat against a half giant. Next time they may not be so brash. I’m keeping Corge’s horse. Are you two happy with your mounts? I noticed a few good ones that Aram didn’t butcher.”

“You said to fight dirty,” Aram reminded him. “Jason and I will retain our steeds. Chancy chose well, and we have no time to spare.”

“No argument here,” Ferrin agreed, grabbing some gear and mounting Corge’s horse.

“Should we scatter the other horses?” Jason asked.

“Not worth the time,” Ferrin said. “There are more horses in the village. When reinforcements get here, they’ll already be mounted.”

Aram maneuvered his horse close to Jason. “You did well back there,” he said, placing a large hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Whatever. I should be dead. Thanks for bailing me out.”

“You were more effective than I expected with those rocks. And you survived your first swordfight. Many can’t say the same.”

“Dawn approaches,” Ferrin reminded them, kicking his horse into motion.

Aram nodded. "Let's cover some ground before I shrink."

They rode cross-country to the southwest as the eastern sky brightened behind them. As sunrise seemed imminent, Aram brought them to a halt near a small glade, dismounted, and stripped down to his breeches. He packed his armor, sword, and heavy cloak onto his big horse, collected a bundle from his saddle, and started toward the glade.

"Where are you going?" Ferrin asked.

"To get a little privacy," Aram replied.

"Why?" Ferrin pursued.

Aram averted his gaze. "You think I want you watching? It's humiliating!"

"We can turn away," Jason said. "We won't look."

Aram's meaty shoulders sagged. "All right."

"Here comes daybreak," Ferrin announced jovially. "Shall we avert our eyes?"

"We have almost a minute," Aram said. "Sorry to be particular about this. You see, at night I feel like my true self. I don't when I'm Goya or Burt. I hate the thought of people looking at big Aram and picturing some puny—"

Aram uttered a low, involuntary groan.

Ferrin and Jason glanced at each other and turned away.

Behind them, Aram panted and grunted. They waited.

"All right," said a less manly voice.

Jason and Ferrin turned. Aram, face shiny with sweat, pulled a small pair of pants over his skinny legs. His shrunken hands trembled.

Ferrin struggled not to smile. He was unsuccessful.

Ferrin's involuntary grin forced Jason to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Ferrin noticed and began to shake, eyes watering.

Aram hastily pulled on a shirt. Then he folded his arms, glaring grumpily up at the others. "Go ahead, let it out, have a good laugh."

They did.

Feeding off each other, magnified by the knowledge that the laughter was so inappropriate, their mirth was uncontrollable. Ferrin buried his face, attempting to compose himself. Jason stared at the ground, trying to summon sober thoughts.

"We need to go," Aram said indignantly, clambering up onto his suddenly oversized horse. Atop the huge stallion, he looked like a little jockey.

Jason coughed out a final laugh.

Ferrin shook quietly, wiping tears from flushed cheeks.

“Finished?” Aram asked. “You two are ruthless.” He looked down at himself. “I guess it’s quite a contrast.”

“We don’t mean to rub it in,” Jason apologized. “We’ve already seen you both ways. It isn’t that big of a deal.”

“It doesn’t help that you’re so shy about it,” Ferrin tried to explain. “It was more your expression than anything.”

“Let’s leave it behind us,” Aram said, nudging his horse with his heels. The stallion didn’t respond.

Ferrin buried his face in the crook of his arm. Jason ground his teeth.

After Aram flicked the reins and gave a couple of harder kicks, his horse started forward.



# FORTAIM

By the time Ferrin, Aram, and Jason had stashed their horses in the woods below the ruined castle of the Blind King, night had fallen. The glow of the waning moon provided the only light as they surveyed the silent hilltop.

“Very quiet,” Ferrin whispered, eyes intent on the dark castle from his crouched position behind a bush. “Almost looks abandoned.”

“They may be asleep,” Aram said.

“Something’s different,” Jason murmured, his gaze gliding from the crumbling walls to the single tall tower. “I know. There used to be two towers. One that looked ready to collapse. I guess it did.”

“Fortaim is in worse repair than on my last visit,” Ferrin agreed. “Shameful, really. The stronghold was once formidable.”

Staring at the dark windows, Jason bit his lower lip. If imperial troops had beaten them here, Galloran might already have been taken. Or worse. Trying to keep his composure, Jason told himself that they had no actual information yet. Hopefully, there was another explanation.

“Could this be a trap?” Aram asked.

“We’re being hunted,” Ferrin said. “Our enemies could have anticipated this destination, particularly if the lurker is still aiding them.”

“I haven’t noticed the lurker,” Jason said.

“That doesn’t mean it hasn’t been watching,” Ferrin said. “No spy is more stealthy. Then again, it had you in an excellent trap back at the ferry. It might have assumed victory and departed.”

Ever since sunrise, Ferrin had led them across lonely terrain, passing monstrous oklinder bushes and groves of tall, slender trees. They had glimpsed no other people, friend or foe. Ferrin had allowed only a few short breaks to rest and eat some of the greasy clam fritters prepared by Moira. Aram had acted a little sulky all day, but at sundown his attitude had improved with the return of his intimidating size.

“Do we go in?” Jason asked. They had been watching for several minutes.

Ferrin gave a nod. "I have a plan. If this proves to be an ambush, Aram will kill everyone. And their horses."

"I love strategy," the big man replied.

"Where does the Blind King sleep?" Ferrin asked.

"At the top of the tower," Jason said.

Ferrin stared, as if trying to visually penetrate the castle walls. "If this is an ambush, it's masterful. I haven't seen a sentry. I haven't glimpsed a flame or smelled any smoke. I haven't heard a horse so much as snort."

"No coughs," Aram added. "No conversation. No footfalls."

"Let's have a look," Ferrin said. "Stay ready to run."

The trio slunk forward to a place where the wall had crumbled inward. After listening for a moment, Ferrin gestured for Aram and Jason to wait. Flitting from shadow to shadow, he explored the courtyard, passing out of view. After a few minutes, he returned and waved them in.

Jason and Aram caught up to Ferrin beside a mossy stone block. The displacer was examining a dented helmet. "This belonged to a conscriptor. It hasn't been here long."

Rubble from the fallen tower was strewn across the moonlit courtyard. Several wide, shallow depressions cratered the yard. Moving cautiously, Ferrin squatted beside a blackened pit and sniffed. "Orantium," he murmured. "The explosion was recent."

Jason felt deflated. This was starting to look really bad for the Blind King. He tried to detach from his emotions, but could not help quietly despairing.

Picking their way through the jumbled stones and timbers left by the toppled tower, Ferrin paused to indicate a dusty arm protruding from the rubble. Farther along, near the gates of the great hall adjoining the only remaining tower, they found a corpse pierced by arrows.

Jason recognized her. "She served the Blind King. She was part of the crazy group making up stories in the throne room." Despite the rising nausea, he kept his voice steady.

"Imperial troops only leave enemy corpses behind as a mark of disdain," Ferrin said. "They want the populace to view Fortaim as a monument of shame. I'm afraid the castle is vacant. The troops appear to have moved on."

"Shouldn't we check his room?" Jason asked. "He might have left a message."

"We've come this far," Ferrin said.

The door to the largest, most intact building hung askew on twisted hinges. Inside the great hall, they found the shabby throne overturned and the floor

pitted from more orantium detonations. In a corner, Aram spotted a dead hound. Jason noticed dark smears of dried blood on the floor. A broken sword lay near the door granting access to the tower.

Mounting the winding stairs up the tower, they encountered a second cadaver on a landing. "He also served the Blind King," Jason confirmed, examining the mustached face, struggling to keep his emotions clinical.

At the top of the gloomy stairwell, the door had been forced open. Inside the room, a dark, spindly figure crouched on the windowsill, backlit by the moon.

"Who goes there?" Ferrin challenged, drawing his sword.

"I was here first," the figure countered, twisting and coiling as if prepared to leap to his doom. "Who are you?"

"Travelers," Ferrin said. "We seek the Blind King."

"Poor timing," the figure replied, voice anguished.

"What happened here?" Aram asked.

"Did a crow peck out your eyes?" the figure cackled. "There was a massacre."

Jason resisted a vision of Galloran dead alongside the rest of his servants. Stepping around Ferrin, he stared hard at the lanky figure. "Your voice is familiar."

"Jason?" the figure replied doubtfully, his posture changing. "Is that you?"

"Ned?" Jason gasped. "What are you doing here?"

Ned's posture relaxed a degree. "I found him," he said softly. "After all these years, I found him. But I may have lost him again."

"We're looking for him too," Jason said.

Ned's feet came down from the windowsill. He closed the shutters, then twisted a short length of seaweed, which began to emit a purplish glow.

By the violet light, Jason recognized the strange freckled man who had aided him and Rachel months ago in a seaside village. Then, he had worn a sack with holes cut for his arms and head. Now he wore a soiled shirt and trousers. He remained tall and gangly, with disheveled hair. A long knife hung from his belt, as did several pouches. He still wore a glove on one hand.

The luminescent seaweed also revealed a pale corpse on the floor: a wiry old man with a long ragged beard, lying supine. Jugard, from the sea cave.

Jason closed his eyes for a moment. When would this parade of familiar corpses end? Opening his eyes, Jason considered the body once more. It was unmistakably the wily old man from the sea cave.

"That light might be visible from below," Ferrin hissed.

Ned muted the seaweed under his shirt, then glided sideways on the balls of his feet, moving in a slight crouch, as if ready to bolt. "All the windows are shuttered," he replied. "They work, I've checked."

Ferrin, flanked by Aram and Jason, came farther into the room.

"Why is Jugard here?" Jason asked.

"I was sent to fetch him from the sea cave."

"By the Blind King?"

"Who else would I obey?"

"How'd he die?"

"He was a corpse when I found him in the sea cave," Ned claimed. "It didn't seem right to leave him there. He'd been stabbed in the back. A lot."

Jason gritted his teeth. "Who did it?"

"No friend of ours."

Jason scowled. "How'd you get past the crab?"

"Didn't. I scaled the cliff with Jugard on my shoulders."

"Climbed a cliff with a corpse in tow?" Aram challenged. "I'm not sure even I could manage that."

"I never claimed you could," Ned muttered.

Ned seemed tense, jittery. Then again, he had always behaved oddly. Ned had given help in the past, but Jason questioned how much to trust him. "You work for the Blind King?"

"Not when I first met you," Ned explained. "I do now. You and Rachel left a trail. I backtracked and found my former master. I hadn't seen him in years." His voice had an edge that suggested he was about to burst into either hysterical cackles or uncontrollable sobs. "Who are your new companions?"

"Ferrin and Aram."

"Are they trustworthy? Loyal to our cause?"

"I think so."

Ned dipped his head. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Nedwin, the Blind King's new squire. And also his former squire." He interlocked his long fingers and rapidly twiddled his thumbs. His unsettling smile showed crooked teeth in the muted purple light.

"Did Tark make it here?" Jason asked.

"Three days ago, filthy and half starved."

"He delivered my message?"

"That was why I was dispatched to retrieve Jugard."

"You returned tonight?"

“Shortly before you three came blundering through the courtyard.”

“Blundering?” Ferrin repeated, mildly offended.

“Noisily and sloppily. Mostly the big one, subtle as a church bell rolling down a stairway. You didn’t appear imperial, so I allowed you to find me.”

“And your backup plan was to leap from the tower window?” Aram asked.

“Maybe,” Ned said, one eye twitching.

“He wouldn’t have fallen,” Jason said. “He can climb like a spider. Ned, do you think the Blind King was captured?”

“I hope not. Sightless or not, he’s sly. He always has an escape planned. Those who assaulted Fortaim probably paid sorely for the lives they claimed. The crooked tower was rigged to collapse, and he maintained an impressive stockpile of orantium.”

“We noticed the damage,” Aram said. “That much orantium would have been worth a fortune.”

“Irreplaceable,” Ned agreed.

“Do you know where he might be, Ned?” Jason asked.

“I prefer to be called ‘Nedwin.’ It evokes happier times.” Nedwin motioned Jason toward him. “A private word?”

Jason glanced at Ferrin and Aram. They shrugged.

Jason walked over to Nedwin, who leaned in close and whispered softly, “You’re really with these two?”

“Yeah,” Jason whispered back.

“If you’re in trouble, I can get us out of here.”

“I’m good.”

“All right. If you’re sure.” Nedwin straightened up to his full height, nearly half a head taller than Jason, though unimpressive when measured against Aram. “This room is smaller than it should be,” he announced.

“What?” Jason asked.

Nedwin turned, gesturing. “After viewing the tower from without, the observer would expect more space over here. Instead we have a premature wall.”

“Secret passage?” Ferrin asked.

Nedwin was already running his palms over the snugly mortared blocks. Behind a tapestry, he found a trigger that opened a small door constructed to blend with the masonry of the wall. “This way.”

Nedwin turned and dragged Jugard’s body into the secret space, leaving him on his back against the far wall. The others followed Nedwin into a cramped hall almost too low and narrow for Aram. Nedwin closed the hidden door and

then removed the glowing seaweed from his shirt. He led the way, and Aram brought up the rear, moving in an awkward, sideways crouch. Curving around the perimeter of the round room, the claustrophobic hall became a narrow stairway that spiraled down directly below the regular stairwell.

They descended until emerging into musty tunnels in the bowels of the castle. Jason heard rats chittering and scampering beyond the violet glow of the seaweed. Nedwin navigated down several passageways, doubling back from empty rooms, dead ends, and collapsed corridors. At last they reached a cluttered storeroom.

“Ah,” Nedwin said. “Feel the draft?”

“Now that you mention it,” Aram said, licking a finger and holding it up.

Nedwin’s freckled hand glided over the surface of a bare wall. Before long he tripped a mechanism that revealed a secret closet. On the floor of the closet awaited a trapdoor. Nedwin crouched and opened it.

“Who trespasses here?” inquired a gruff voice from the darkness below.

“Nedwin and Lord Jason,” Nedwin answered. “Accompanied by two friends.”

“You may pass.” The dark hole filled with light. Jason judged that it was a twenty-foot drop. Buttressed by heavy beams, the dirt walls and floor beyond the trapdoor lacked the masonry of the finished corridors above.

Nedwin signaled for Jason to descend a rope ladder. Jason had some trouble getting started, backing hesitantly through the trapdoor, but climbed down easily once his hands and feet found purchase. Ferrin and Aram came after, and finally Nedwin, who closed the trapdoor and sped down the ladder, dropping the final eight feet.

The voice down the hole had belonged to the gatekeeper who had first admitted Jason to the ruined castle of the Blind King. Laying aside a crossbow and a halberd, he greeted Jason heartily, then turned a wary eye to Ferrin and Aram.

“Who are these two?”

“Ferrin and Aram,” Jason answered. “My friends. I wouldn’t be alive without their help.”

“I’m Vernon,” the gatekeeper said.

“We must consult with His Majesty,” Nedwin said.

“Follow me,” Vernon said, leading them along the subterranean passage.

“Is Tark here?” Aram asked.

“Yes,” Vernon said. “Would you like to see him?”

“A superb idea,” Nedwin interjected. “Vernon, see that Ferrin and Aram get to greet Tark after you deliver us to the king.”

Vernon stopped at a sturdy door built into a crudely excavated wall of natural dirt and stone. As he lifted a fist to knock, the portal opened. There stood the Blind King, his hair and beard long and gray, a dingy rag binding his eyes, a grimy robe hanging from his broad shoulders.

Before Jason had last met the Blind King, he had never heard the name Galloran. As a newcomer to Lyrian, he’d failed to grasp the significance of the grubby king’s secret identity. He hadn’t known how many still revered him as the greatest hero in Lyrian. Without any flashy pretense, here stood the true heir to Trensicourt, the strongest human kingdom not directly controlled by Maldor. Jason felt honored and relieved to be back in his presence.

“Did I hear Nedwin?” Galloran rasped with his damaged voice.

“And Lord Jason,” Nedwin said.

The king’s mouth spread into a wide grin, forming deep creases in the whiskerless skin around his eyes and cheeks. “Is that so?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Jason said. “Along with two new friends.”

“Wonderful, come inside.” Galloran backed away from the door.

“You may want to first talk with Jason and me in private,” Nedwin suggested. “His friends are anxious to greet Tark.”

“By all means, go find him,” the king grated.

Jason shared a glance with Ferrin. He could sense that the displacer resented Nedwin not wanting him in the room. Vernon closed the door, leaving Jason and Nedwin with Galloran.

Dorsio, a slender man with a shiny scar down the side of his face, sat unobtrusively in one corner. Jason knew that Dorsio, unable to speak, communicated with Galloran through touch and a system of snaps and claps.

The underground chamber was more storage room than sitting room, but had a cot, a wooden bench, a table, and a couple of chairs. The rest of the space was taken up by stacked barrels, crates, and sacks. Galloran sat on the cot, motioning for the others to sit on the bench.

“You two are well?” Galloran asked.

“Yes,” they both responded.

“What of Jugard?” Galloran asked.

“I found his corpse,” Nedwin replied. “He was stabbed to death no more than a day before my arrival.” Jason noticed that Nedwin suddenly seemed calmer and more coherent.

Galloran pounded a fist against his palm. "I feared as much. Jason unraveled the deception, and word of the false quest is now spreading, so Maldor is retaliating with violence. Did you have to slip past soldiers to get in here?"

"No," Nedwin said. "They've abandoned Fortaim."

"Then it was recently," Galloran said. "They've been scouring the area for the past two days, trying to figure out how we slipped away. The time to act is upon us. Perhaps we can still save some of the other guardians: Trivett, Malar, the Pythoness and ..." The king paused, unable to continue.

"Corinne," Nedwin supplied.

Galloran nodded silently, his chin briefly trembling with emotion. "How could I have forgotten her for so long?" he rasped softly.

"What matters is that you have remembered."

"You have your memories back?" Jason asked.

"Many of them, thanks to Nedwin."

"I've been giving him small doses of a peculiar variety of snake venom," Nedwin explained. "Comes from a canopy cobra, a furtive species found high in the trees. I've spent the last few years collecting rare specimens from the southern jungle. Too solitary and dangerous a job for most, but perfect for a man with keen senses and a defective personality. The right plant extract or spider poison can fetch a princely sum."

"The cobra venom is sometimes employed by Maldor to extract information," Galloran added.

"They used it on me!" Jason said. "Blue and purple snake?"

Nedwin bobbed his head. "That's the one. I routinely kept some of the more interesting samples I gathered." He patted the pouches at his belt. "I recalled how the canopy cobras were used inside of Felrook. When I captured one in the jungle, I milked a vial for my own use."

"Nedwin talks to me about my past while administering doses of varying strengths," Galloran said. "After the effect of the venom wanes, he reminds me of all we discussed, adding details that he personally recalls. In a matter of weeks, most of my mental barriers have been torn down."

"You mentioned Corinne," Jason prompted.

"Yes." Anxiety colored his words. "You must have met her."

"I did," Jason said. "I can't remember her directly. The weird round mushrooms in her tree blocked our memories. But she was alive. The Pythoness was Corinne's mother, right?"



“The Pythoness was her great-aunt,” Galloran said. “Inside the tree, she raised Corinne as her own. Outside of the tree, Corinne understood the reality of the relationship.”

“We promised Corinne we’d return if we found the Word.”

“It may be too late,” Galloran said, striving to sound detached. “Jugard’s death proves that Maldor is moving against the syllable guardians. Thanks to protective spells woven into their sanctuaries, the emperor can’t use magic against them, nor can he send wizardborn races like displacers or manglers. But I’m not sure much besides secrecy ever guarded them from simple human assassins. The thought of Maldor sending troops to harm her ...” Veins stood out on the back of his fists.

“It sounds like you know Corinne well,” Jason said, trying to fill the silence.

“She is my daughter,” Galloran answered, his voice hollow. “My last living child.”

“What?” Jason exclaimed.

“Maldor went to great lengths to target the royal family of Trensicourt. He slew my brothers, my son, my wife. In her youth, I hid Corinne with her great-aunt for her protection. After all these years, that decision may have fatally exposed her.”

“We’ll rescue her,” Nedwin vowed. “We’ll hurriedly recover all the remaining guardians.”

“We needn’t fret for the Prophetess of Mianamon,” Galloran said. “She has enough protection until Maldor triumphs in the east. And I do not expect Maldor would target the loremaster Bridonus, given his attitude and connections.”

“He’s Copernum’s father,” Jason remembered.

“And Damak’s son,” Nedwin added.

“Damak?” Jason said. “The torture guy?”

“Bridonus lacks their ruthlessness, but he is essentially a puppet of the emperor,” Galloran said. “The three other remaining guardians must be rescued.”

“I’ll see to it,” Nedwin said.

Galloran nodded slowly, placing his palms together at his lips. “Trivett on the Isle of Weir will be the hardest to reach. Perhaps we’ll dispatch Vernon.”

“Have you heard anything about Rachel?” Jason asked, internally crossing his fingers.

“Tark related how he left her with Drake,” Galloran said. “He is a seedman of no small reputation, though by my day he had already withdrawn from the rebellion against Maldor. I have heard no tidings regarding Rachel, but if Drake meant to disappear with her into the wilderness, the lack of information is encouraging.”

“I have to find her,” Jason said.

“We’ll make every effort,” Galloran promised. “Nedwin, have you anything else to report?”

“Not at present, sire. You’ll want to interview the men Jason brought.”

“Naturally. Begin preparations for us to depart in the morning. We will all require horses. I wish to converse with Lord Jason in private.”

“Certainly, sire.” Nedwin rose and exited the room.

“I never expected to see Ned again,” Jason said once the door had closed. “When I first met him, he took my knife and threatened me.”

“He related your first encounter,” Galloran said. “Nedwin is doing his best to cope with deep scars.”

“He used to be your servant?” Jason asked.

“My squire. When I was blinded and captured by the conscriptor Grollis, Nedwin was apprehended as well. He was a bright, sensitive young man with enormous potential. That was about fourteen years ago. After six years of torture I was released—a blind, enfeebled mockery of my former self. During the first few years of my incarceration, I was near Nedwin on occasion. He had an unconquerable will and remained fiercely loyal to me even after I was reduced to a babbling wretch. Because of his strength, the tormentors pushed the limits with Nedwin, experimenting with untried toxins and procedures.

“After I was released, I assumed Nedwin had perished. His fate remained a mystery until he located me by following your trail. I’ve learned that he remained imprisoned more than five years longer than I, enduring excruciating reconditioning the entire time. When he first arrived here, wearing only a coarse sack and a glove, he seemed beyond the brink of madness. But in a short while he has come a long way. Once he was the clever and articulate younger brother of the Earl of Geer. Maldor’s tormentors shattered him, deformed his mind, but he is battling his way back toward sanity. Never have I witnessed a more valiant spirit.”

“I had no idea,” Jason said.

Galloran rubbed the side of his cot. “I know firsthand how thoroughly the tormentors can annihilate a person. Even disregarding my eyes, I do not yet feel

like the man I was. It has been an arduous process of long, anonymous years, gradually overcoming fears and frailties to reassemble my identity. My memories regarding the Word were the hardest to recapture, though I've finally enjoyed major breakthroughs of late." Galloran sniffed, adjusting his blindfold. "The time to reconstruct myself has now passed. The hour to act has arrived. Do you intend to continue with us in this cause?"

"That's why I'm here."

Galloran sighed. "Difficult times have befallen us. You've already endured many hardships."

"I'm lucky to be alive."

"Luck only carries any of us so far. You've achieved much more than mere luck would allow. You've made smart choices, forged strategic relationships. Tell me about when you used the Word. Are you certain you said it to Maldor in person?"

"Yes," Jason said. "He didn't know I had the whole thing, so he admitted me to his throne room with a big crowd there. The Word vanished from my mind when I spoke it, but it didn't bother Maldor. He later explained that it was actually the Word to destroy some other wizard named Orruck."

"Orruck?" Galloran repeated, stroking his beard. "Intriguing."

"Maldor told me that years ago you spoke the Word to him in person. Since you were blind, he pretended you were talking to a decoy."

Galloran steepled his fingers. "I only recently remembered that episode with help from Nedwin. So I was actually in the presence of the emperor." A small, sad smile appeared on his lips. "He is a truly gifted liar. Thank you for the vital knowledge that the Word itself is fraudulent. It sickens me to consider how much time and effort has been misdirected. The knowledge you sent with Tark taught me that I remain capable of outrage. As soon as I learned of the elaborate deception, I sent Nedwin to retrieve Jugard from his pointless guardianship, and then I began concocting a plan."

"Can you tell me?"

"It continues to evolve, but centers on uniting all who continue to oppose Maldor in a desperate gambit. It was a course of action I considered long ago, but Kadara still imagined itself untouchable, and too many kingdoms denied the urgency of the situation, preferring to pretend they could somehow appease Maldor and avoid war, so I elected to hunt the Word instead. Hopefully, it is not too late to atone for my folly."

"I'll help if I can," Jason said.

“That would be most appreciated,” Galloran said. “Tark told me that you escaped from Felrook. How did you manage such a feat?”

“A displacer rescued me and then forced me to return to the Beyond.”

“A displacer?”

“Yeah. When I first arrived here, I had no idea that displacers served Maldor. A displacer befriended me and Rachel to observe our actions, but we sent him away once we learned he worked for the emperor. He must have taken some genuine interest in me, because he smuggled me out of Felrook after the Word failed against Maldor and I was captured.”

“He returned you to the Beyond?”

“Yes, using a gateway near Felrook. He only released me from Felrook on the condition that I would go directly home. Despite my promise, I tried to escape, so I could warn you that the Word is a fraud. But he overpowered me and sent me away.”

“And you came back to Lyrian?” Galloran said in disbelief.

“Believe it or not, I came through the same hippopotamus that brought me here the first time. Jumped into the tank on purpose. I wanted to keep others from wasting their time pursuing the Word. And I couldn’t just ditch Rachel.”

Galloran smiled. “Truly, you are possessed by that species of madness that begets heroism. You have performed an invaluable service. Tell me about your new companions.”

“One is a mercenary named Aram.”

“Aram the smuggler? A mountainous man?”

“Yes.”

“I know of him. He has never displayed any willingness to resist the emperor. How did you retain his services?”

“Tark recommended him to me, then I got in good with his mother, and she convinced him. I’m not sure whether he’s fully committed yet. He’s getting there. You should see him fight!”

“That might prove difficult.”

“Whoops, I meant—”

“I’m jesting. Who is the other?”

“Ferrin the displacer.”

Even with most of his face concealed behind a blindfold and a beard, Galloran looked alarmed. “He has a deadly reputation. A foe most devious and capable. Young for a displacer, he was just rising to prominence back when I was completing the Word. My sources have followed his career. If his character were

less capricious and his methods more orthodox, he would already be a candidate to lead the displacers. This is the displacer who freed you?"

"Yes. According to him, Maldor discovered his participation in my rescue, and he now wants to join our side."

"How convinced are you of his sincerity?"

"Not completely certain. He's been really helpful so far. And he's already passed up a bunch of chances to betray me. Without his help, I doubt I'd be here."

Galloran took a deep breath. "Giving him our trust could prove ruinous. I've learned never to underestimate the deceptive abilities of our enemies. Malar is the only displacer I've ever met who truly joined our cause, though plenty have pretended. Summon your new comrades, and we'll see what I can discern."

As Jason rose from the bench, Dorsio crossed the room and opened the door. Down the hall, Aram and Ferrin stood conversing with Tark. When the short musician saw Jason, he broke off the conversation and sprinted down the passageway. "Lord Jason!" he cried. "I'm sorry I was unable to meet you at Potsug." He looked distressed.

"It worked out," Jason said. "You recommended a good bodyguard."

"All they wanted was you. Our enemies, I mean. Soon after you left me, a group of soldiers began hunting me in earnest, ready to dispose of me after I had led them to their true quarry. It was quite a chase. I killed a few of them. It took me longer than I had anticipated to work my way here."

"I'm glad you made it. I was worried about you."

Tark beamed, then scowled. "The evening I arrived, the castle came under assault. I feel like a token of foul luck. All around me suffer."

"It had to be the information you carried," Jason said. "They must have found out what I told you."

"I revealed nothing until I arrived here!" Tark swore.

"They may have guessed. Maldor knows what secrets I carry. Or the lurker could have overheard us." Jason turned to Aram and Ferrin. "Galloran wants to talk to all of us."

"Galloran is here?" Tark exclaimed.

"He didn't tell you?" Jason said. "Come with us."

The four of them entered the room with Galloran. Dorsio closed the door, remaining inside.

"Do you mind if Tark joins us?" Jason asked.

"Not at all," Galloran said.

Jason sat on a chair off to the side. Ferrin, Aram, and Tark sat on the bench.

“You’re Galloran?” Tark asked in awe.

The Blind King snorted. “Is this becoming common knowledge?”

“I know how you feel,” grumbled Aram.

“Ferrin deduced it long before we got here,” Jason said.

“Ah, yes, the master spy,” Galloran said. “I have heard frightening reports about you from my sources.”

“Likewise,” Ferrin said.

Galloran chuckled. “I’m sure the gossip about me was terrifying. Were you warned that I was a blind pauper serving as an arbiter in a ruined castle?”

“You’ve only been lionized into the greatest hero of our time,” Ferrin responded. “I expect the reputation is well deserved.”

Galloran appeared thoughtful. “An inflated reputation can be useful when inciting a revolution. Aram, am I to understand you have enlisted in our cause?”

The others all looked to the big man. He swallowed. “Do we have a chance of success?”

Galloran crinkled his brow pensively. “A succinct and important question. The situation is dire. Our first order of business will be to investigate our assets. Without some key alliances, we have no chance. Even if we manage to unite the remaining free citizens of Lyrian, it may be too little, too late. But this effort will certainly represent our last opportunity to prevent an age of tyranny that will endure for many generations. I will not give up the cause until I am sure we cannot prevail.”

“Then I will join you until the cause proves unwinnable,” Aram said.

“You’re a mercenary. I have little to offer you at present. Should we succeed, you will receive a barony.”

“You’d make a fine baron,” Tark encouraged.

Smirking self-consciously, the big man looked around the small, dusty room. “We can discuss payment once you’ve been restored to your throne.”

“Fair enough.”

Aram cleared his throat. “I may as well tell you, since the secret is out: I’m half giant. My usefulness fades each morning at sunrise and does not recommence until dusk.”

“Half giant?” Galloran said. “How did you come to be?”

Tark gaped at Aram in astonishment.

“My mother is human; my father, a giant.”

“No magic?”

“Just nature.”

“Fascinating. Welcome, Aram.” Galloran turned his head, as if looking at Ferrin. “Back to the matter of the famed Ferrin, son of Baldor. Am I to believe you honestly mean to join our rebellion?”

“I do,” Ferrin replied. His voice and expression seemed relaxed, but Jason sensed a nervous tension underneath.

“You desire this alliance because your impulsive rescue of Lord Jason offended Maldor?”

“And he must know I’ve learned about the fraudulent Word,” Ferrin added. “Maldor has irrevocably become my enemy.”

Galloran frowned. “A common enemy is not necessarily a reliable basis for friendship.”

“The circumstances have compelled me to take a step I have long contemplated. Even when I served him, I quietly yearned to see the emperor overthrown.”

“You did not believe it was possible,” Galloran said flatly.

“I still have my doubts, but I’m willing to try. I know much that could be of service.”

“Undoubtedly. How can I know you will not betray us?”

“I could give you my word.”

“You’re a displacer! Your people have sworn fealty to Maldor. You have personally vowed to defend and uphold his rule. Your presence here makes you a traitor to your kind and an oath breaker to your liege. A tarnished word is of little value.”

Ferrin had grown rigid. “Your honor is renowned, and you’re right that mine is blemished. Perhaps the truest pledge I can offer is that I understand how the emperor functions.”

“Do you?”

“Maldor never forgives treachery. Especially from a steward of my rank. Regardless of how substantially I might aid him in the future by subverting your efforts, I know I can never regain his confidence. He would gladly reap the reward of any betrayal I enacted, but regardless of any good I do for him, death and worse await if ever I come within his reach.”

“You speak the truth. But do you realize it?”

“Maldor is my eternal enemy, because no matter what I do, I am his.”

Galloran leaned forward. “But what if Maldor already forgave your indiscretion? Or even planned it? What if you are not a fugitive as you claim?”

What if this is an elaborate scheme?"

All eyes regarded Ferrin.

"Has the emperor orchestrated more subtle and complicated intrigues than you are describing? Absolutely. But if I were a spy, I would not know my trade had I waited until now to act. An hour ago, while exploring Fortaim, I had enough distance between myself and my comrades to easily slip away and lead an army to your doorstep."

"The emperor is patient," Galloran replied. "The emperor treasures information. The emperor might want to investigate how far our budding conspiracy reaches. He might want to root out everyone involved, not just snatch Jason or me. I have some well-placed sources, and I have heard nothing about a manhunt for you, Ferrin. Not a word about your defection."

Ferrin shook his head. "If it could be avoided, Maldor would never announce that a high-ranking displacer had betrayed his cause. He has kept the search for me quiet. But keep your ears open. After my treasonous activities early this morning, in front of imperial witnesses, my defection will become common knowledge. I'll be nearly as wanted as Jason."

"What about the betrayal of your people?" Galloran wondered. "The displacers are well acquainted with the price of failure in wartime. If Maldor falls, the displacers fall with him. You can live with that?"

"I detest the idea of hindering my kind," Ferrin admitted. "We've dealt with more than our rightful share of persecution. But displacers are already doomed. Fearful of natural humans losing dominance, all of the wizards who founded races included safeguards to limit breeding. As you're aware, when displacers were first created, the odds of having a male child were five times greater than a female. That disparity has increased over time. Today not even one in thirty displacers born is female. Yes, our race lives longer than regular humans, but our ultimate fate is sealed. We were condemned by our founder. We'll cease to exist within three or four generations."

"So why not rise up against the apprentice of your founder?" Galloran summarized skeptically. "Punish him for the sins of his master?"

"It wouldn't have been my first choice," Ferrin said frankly. "However deranged Zokar may have been, or how oppressive Maldor could prove, at least they were on our side. They didn't hunt us. They never openly despised us. Not as a people. My personal story is different. I'm being hunted by Maldor. I've earned his enmity. In return, he has earned mine. I wouldn't be here if not for extenuating circumstances. But I'm at peace with my decision. I am



wholeheartedly committed. I would be happy to do whatever you'd like to prove myself."

Galloran let a pregnant silence draw out. All eyes watched him intently. "Two requirements. First, you will take credit for all the harm we do as we make our way across Lyrian. 'Ferrin, son of Baldor, was here.' You get the idea."

"Make my betrayal public knowledge. Defy Maldor openly to ensure that he could never take me back."

Galloran nodded. "And I will need you to detach a small segment from your neck. The divot must include part of your carotid artery. Dorsio will keep it safe."

Ferrin grinned darkly. "You could use the piece of my neck to poison me at will. If I choose to let go of the connection, I bleed to death."

"I harbor hope that you are sincere," Galloran said. "If I didn't, I would execute you. Tonight we stand at the outset of the last serious rebellion against the emperor. At present it is desperately fragile, little more than an idea. Without great care and effort, it will amount to nothing. I would welcome your help, Ferrin, but I will not risk treachery. Accept my conditions, and I will extend my trust."

Ferrin pulled a chunk from his neck and handed it to Dorsio, who studied it and snapped three times.

"I'll spread word of my involvement at every opportunity," Ferrin said. "I pledge my abilities, my knowledge, my resources, and my life to the cause of deposing Maldor. My allegiance is to rebellion."

"Welcome," Galloran said. "We can use your expertise. If you prove faithful, you will have my everlasting support and protection when this conflict ends. I need information. How closely were you followed?"

"We seem to have distanced ourselves from our pursuers," Ferrin said. "The majority of those chasing us came from north of the river, and we sabotaged both ferries at Potsug."

"Good news," Galloran said.

"What about the lurker?" Jason asked.

"Tark mentioned that a torivor might be involved," Galloran said grimly. "You've had contact?"

"Yes," Ferrin said. "We saw the torivor last night. It has been trailing Jason since he parted from Tark."

"Lurkers have not ventured abroad in years," Galloran said.

“Not since you were captured,” Ferrin agreed. “The creature may have returned to Felrook. After spotting us, it prepared a trap that should have resulted in our capture. Once we dodged the trap, the chase became sloppy, making me wonder whether the lurker remained involved. It taxes Maldor greatly to keep them abroad.”

“There is no lurker currently in the vicinity,” Galloran said with confidence. “My family has a history of Edomic aptitude and other unusual mental faculties. I am no wizard, but as much as torivors can sense our minds, I can sense theirs.”

“Fascinating,” Ferrin said. “Can you hear their thoughts?”

“It depends. I can discern certain types of thoughts more clearly than others. But I can always sense their presence. For now, we have no lurkers in the area.”

“That’s a comfort,” Aram said. “But we do have a large force of more conventional enemies in pursuit.”

“All the more reason we must depart in the morning,” Galloran said. “Rest while you may. Tark, you told me you had sworn fealty to Lord Jason.”

“I am his man,” the musician replied solemnly.

“Then I have acquired four unexpected allies of diverse talents. There is little I can bring to our venture at the moment save knowledge and connections. Hopefully, in time, I will regain my kingdom and bring its resources to bear. We must first journey north, to the Sunken Lands, on our way to the Seven Vales. At the Sunken Lands, we will try to rescue my daughter and supply ourselves from a lost stockpile of orantium. At the Seven Vales, we will strive to enlist the Amar Kabal in our rebellion, the most powerful fighting force yet untouched by the emperor. Without their participation, our insurrection will lack any real promise.”

“You think you can rouse the People of the Seed?” Ferrin asked.

“We shall see,” Galloran replied. “Our first obstacle will be crossing the river. I recommend we make for the bridge a day east of Potsug. The troops pursuing Jason from the north will probably cross that bridge tonight and head west. If we move in stealth, we should miss one another.”

“The bridge will be heavily guarded,” Ferrin warned.

“We have a capable team,” Galloran said. “And some orantium remains. Do you recommend an alternate route?”

Ferrin considered the question before answering. “The bridge will be quickest. No crossing will stand unguarded.”

“The bridge it is,” Galloran said. “Eat your fill tonight. We have far more food stored here than we can carry. Sleep all you can. We depart at dawn.”

# RENDEZVOUS

Rachel awoke in the chill of night, bundled in her blankets, the stars blazing more brilliantly than she had ever witnessed. The moon had set, the night was clear, and no overhanging trees impeded her view. In the gaps between the brighter stars, where darkness should have provided background, lesser stars glimmered, faint and plentiful, twinkling specks of dust. She lay on her back, high atop a tall ridge, gazing at the magnificent heavens.

Could any of those pinpricks of light be Earth's sun? If not, were any of those endless stars at least visible from Earth? Maybe with a powerful telescope? Or was this an entirely different universe altogether, inhabiting some alternate dimension? She didn't recognize any constellations.

Rachel looked over at the charm woman. They hadn't built a fire tonight, but the stars shed enough light for her to see that Elaine was gone, her blankets rumped and empty.

Rachel sat up, scared and alert. Why had Elaine snuck away? They had just arrived at the ridge this evening after many consecutive days in the saddle. Elaine's donkey was not swift, but it was tireless. They had started at the first hint of dawn every morning and plodded onward until twilight dwindled.

Low, mumbling voices reached Rachel's ears, a single hushed conversation. Listening intently, she could distinguish between a man and a woman speaking. "Elaine?" Rachel called.

"Here, child. We're coming. Drake has found us."

"Elaine?" Drake asked, his voice scarcely audible. "Is that your name?"

"At present," she answered softly. Two starlit figures walked into view. Elaine raised her voice again. "My charms detected an intruder approaching. I knew it wasn't a lurker. I hoped it was Drake."

"You made good time," Drake remarked. "I expected to beat you here. I had to cover much more ground, but of course Mandibar is extraordinary."

"We only arrived earlier tonight," Rachel said.

"I'm glad we found you awake," Elaine said. "It means my inner ring of charms is working."

"I don't get it," Rachel said.

"The outer ring was rigged to awaken me," Elaine said. "When Drake crossed the inner boundary, you woke up."

Upon quick reflection, Rachel realized that usually when she awoke in the night, she rolled over and went on sleeping. Tonight she had awakened alert, her mind active and inquisitive.

"I didn't set up any violent or distractive enchantments, because I wanted him to find us," Elaine explained.

"I have news," Drake said.

"Tell us," Rachel urged.

"Jason is free."

At first she felt stunned. It took a moment to really process the words. Then such a surge of joy and relief overcame her that Rachel abruptly realized how much of her had never expected to see Jason again. She had faithfully wished for his safety. She had dreamed of an eventual rescue. But deep down, some realistic part of her had known the odds were against it. "Where is he?"

"Our enemies aren't sure," Drake said. "Which bodes well for him, but may make him difficult for us to locate."

"How'd you learn this?" Rachel wondered.

"I set the doll adrift in the Purga River, to create the illusion that you remained in motion. After that I never saw the lurker again, so I assume it took the bait. I traveled north fast enough that I knew I had to be well ahead of you, so I took a side trip to Trensicourt to do some reconnaissance. I still have a few contacts there from bygone years, although they're looking old.

"Once I learned that Jason was supposedly at large, I did some investigating of my own. First, I captured and interrogated a regular imperial soldier, then a displacer."

"You got a displacer to talk?" Elaine asked dubiously.

"It took some finesse," Drake explained. "I pretended to be a bounty hunter, seeking to collect a reward for the capture of Lord Jason. The displacer might not have spilled information to the enemy regardless of the pressure I brought to bear, but he showed only minor resistance to divulging some secrets to an enterprising free agent working with the imperials. I dropped some names and had him convinced."

"What did you learn?" Rachel asked.

“You must understand that our enemies use certain displacers to relay information,” Drake explained. “By exchanging ears, they can communicate over vast distances. Their latest reports suggest that Jason is here in the west, south of the Telkron River, accompanied by a dangerous mercenary and a traitorous displacer.”

“A displacer?” Rachel exclaimed. “Ferrin?”

“That was the name,” Drake confirmed.

“When did you learn all of this?” Elaine asked.

“This afternoon.” Drake studied Rachel. “I take it this alters your plans.”

Rachel looked apologetically at Elaine. At minimum, this would mean a postponement of her training. “We have to find him.”

“We’re in the right part of the world,” Elaine observed. “Any idea where he might be headed?”

“They came south from Ithilum and crossed the Telkron at Potsug,” Drake related. “Most of the forces in the region are being mobilized to track him down. Based on the resources involved, the effort feels more like a war than a manhunt.”

“Which will make finding him hazardous for fellow fugitives,” Elaine said. Her face scrunched in thought. After a moment her expression brightened. “Have you any items Jason owned?”

Drake cocked his head. “He left me with some items before he entered Felrook. I have his signet rings—one pertaining to Caberton, the other to the chancellorship. Let me fetch my horse.”

Elaine held up a hand to stop him. “Rachel. Call Mandibar.”

“Can I do that?” she asked. “How far away is he?”

“Visualize the horse. Speak the summons.”

As they had ridden to the ridge, Elaine had drilled Rachel on issuing suggestions to animals. It was a tricky art. When dealing with matter or energy, you demanded obedience. When dealing with animals, you asked for compliance. If you tried to compel the animal to obey, natural defenses would engage and the suggestion would fail, stunning the speaker, riling the animal, or worse. If you suggested too gently, the animal might simply ignore the recommendation. The suggestion worked best when supported by enough will to make it convincing, while leaving the actual decision to the animal.

Rachel had practiced mostly with her own horse. After erring often by suggesting too softly, she had eventually found the right amount of insistence to employ. She could now confidently convince her mount to stop, go, slow down,

speed up, come, neigh, stomp, rear, buck, calm down, and eat. She had also issued several similar suggestions to Elaine's donkey with routine success. But she had never called out to Mandibar with Edomic, and she had never tried speaking to an animal out of view.

"Okay," Rachel said. Closing her eyes, she imagined Mandibar: his size, his musculature, the sheen of his fur, his name printed on the saddle in neat black letters. She called his name and asked him to come.

Hoofbeats answered her effort of will, and the stallion soon loped into view, slowed to a trot, and plodded over to Rachel, nudging her with his nose. She felt an excited flutter at the prompt success of her summons.

Drake whistled softly. "What can't she do?" He paced over to Mandibar, opened a saddlebag, and pawed through it. He came away with a pair of rings and handed them to Elaine.

She cupped one in each palm, hands bobbing gently, as if weighing them, then gave one back. She held up the other between her thumb and forefinger. "This ring has the stronger connection to him."

"That makes sense," Drake replied. "He had the Caberton ring longer, and has an undisputed claim to ownership."

Elaine held the ring to her ear and closed her eyes, as if listening to secret music. "I can use this to find him. It will take until an hour past dawn to ready the charm."

"I'd call that quick work," Drake replied.

"We're going to find Jason?" Rachel asked, hardly daring to believe it.

Drake tousled her hair. "At least we'll soon know where to look."

The first rays of sunrise shimmered on countless dewdrops as eight riders emerged from a camouflaged portal, well beyond the damaged walls of the crumbling castle. A gentle breeze stole fluffy particles from tall dandelions, scattering airborne seeds across the hillside. Warbling bird calls twittered back and forth in the treetops. One unseen bird hooted like a slide whistle.

Ferrin and Nedwin galloped away from the others to scout the country ahead. Nedwin had already spent the hours before dawn confirming the absence of enemies and collecting the necessary mounts.

Looking undersized, Aram rode the big stallion that had carried him since fleeing Ithilum. Jason rode the same horse that had brought him to Fortaim. Galloran rode beside Dorsio, the silent servant holding a lead, leaving plenty of

slack. Tark brought up the rear, riding alongside Chandra, the cook—a rawboned woman with sun-damaged skin who Jason had never seen smile.

Some of Galloran’s associates had not joined them. Vernon had been left with the assignment to book passage to the Isle of Weir and warn a guardian named Trivett that the Word was a fraud. Jason wondered how Trivett would feel to know that the syllable he had guarded had been inscribed on the wall of the lorevault at Trensicourt. Brin the Gamester was ordered to find his brother, Nicholas, in Trensicourt and tell him about the burgeoning rebellion. A few others whom Jason had not known well were told to scatter and lie low.

Jouncing along on his horse, Jason patted one of his saddlebags. Crystal globes containing chunks of orantium had been dispersed among the riders, with Nedwin and Dorsio carrying the most. Jason had three in his saddlebag, each bundled in cloth. If the crystal casing cracked, exposing the mineral inside to air or water, the orantium would explode violently. Ever since receiving the spheres, Jason had treated them gingerly, unable to erase visions of Jasher being blasted to pieces in the field near Harthenham. Aram had refused to accept any of the spheres, for fear of an accidental detonation.

Jason kept a hand near his saddlebag. Despite the dangers of carrying orantium, he knew how effective the combustible globes could be in a fight. Riding away from Fortaim, he felt most on edge for the first mile or two. Out in the wilderness, he trusted the expertise of Ferrin and Nedwin to steer them away from trouble. Of course, if the lurker crashed the party, that would change everything. But Galloran hadn’t sensed one and seemed confident about his ability to do so.

They kept to obscure trails through woodlands and wild fields, and hours glided past without incident. Ferrin and Nedwin checked in at intervals, describing the topography ahead and suggesting the safest routes. The party stopped twice to eat. By evening they reached a hillside where they could survey the bridge spanning the Telkron River from a wooded vantage.

Three huge arches supported the wide stone bridge. At either end stood a guardhouse, each manned by several soldiers and a trio of manglers. Jason had partly forgotten how intimidating the manglers looked—perfectly designed to shred enemies into confetti, the bulky, insectile creatures had shell-like armor and a wicked variety of blades at the end of their six arms.

“They really mean to catch us,” Ferrin said. “Six manglers to guard a single bridge? That’s uncommon. They must have significant assets in motion.”

“Could we swim the river?” Jason asked. “Or build a raft?”

“Steal a raft?” Nedwin mused.

“The current here is deceptively swift and treacherous,” Aram said, having regained his full size half an hour before. “The river doesn’t slow down until you near Potsug. Hence the bridge.”

“We need our horses and our gear,” Galloran said. “If we can find a raft big enough, we could risk the current. But we can’t afford the time to build one. And we can’t lose time exploring other crossings. Barring unforeseeable opportunities, we’ll assail the bridge in the small hours of the morning. Surprise them with orantium. Perhaps send a couple of our party stealthily across to harass those on the far side. Until then, we should rest. We’ll have to ride hard later.”

“Once we’re over the bridge, I’ll take a detour to Whitelake,” Nedwin said. “Fetch Malar.”

Galloran nodded his approval. “You can manage the lake?”

“Yes.”

“Where could we meet?”

“Just south of Three Peaks,” Nedwin answered.

“So be it,” Galloran confirmed.

“I’ll scout for rafts,” Ferrin offered.

Dorsio snapped and motioned that he would join Ferrin.

Tark offered to take the first watch, and everyone dispersed, some to sleep, some to reconnoiter. While fetching blankets from his saddle, Jason found himself alone with Nedwin. The redhead was sorting through a variety of metal vials that hung from his neck by thin leather cords.

“What do you have there?” Jason asked.

“Some of the substances I’ve collected,” he said. “I have a powder that can bother any animals attempting to track us. I thought I’d scatter some here, then more after we cross.”

“How’d you learn so much about herbs and snakes and everything?”

Nedwin’s cheek twitched. “When I was imprisoned at Felrook, I kept my ears and eyes open. Quietly I learned to prepare many of the concoctions administered to me. When I was finally released, it became an obsession to gather the materials they had used. By immersing myself in the endeavor, I continued to learn.” He held up some vials, one at a time. “This induces sleep; this causes gut-wrenching nausea; this opens the mind to suggestion; this increases sensitivity to pain.”

“Increases pain?”



Nedwin kept that vial in his long hand, stroking it with his thumb. “A mixture of tarantula poison and juice distilled from a certain carnivorous plant. After a tiny dose, pressure feels like pain, and pain flares into an otherwise impossible agony.”

“You experienced it?”

Nedwin gave a bitter chuckle. His somber smile bespoke dark memories. “Endlessly. They probed the limits of my tolerance. Under the influence of the substance, a finger pressed to my shoulder felt like it was boring into me, searing my flesh. But they wouldn’t stop there. They would slap me, or cut me, eliciting overwhelming surges of anguish. Then they would drill my teeth.”

Jason winced and clapped a hand over his mouth, experiencing phantom pain just hearing the description.

“Copernum was the worst of them,” Nedwin muttered resentfully.

“Chancellor Copernum?”

Nedwin nodded, wringing his freckled hand with his gloved hand. “He was my chief tormentor for the final years of my confinement. I had been transported to the small dungeon of his manor at Trensicourt. He had a grudge against my family. He won our title from my elder brother. Once I had been reduced to a gibbering lunatic, he finally released me. He was liberal with nervesong, the pain enhancer. It had some ancillary effects. Along with amplifying pain, it quickened my other senses: hearing, sight, smell. Under its influence, I overheard many conversations not intended for my ears. Over time, the enhancement of my senses began to linger. And my ability to feel pain vanished.”

“Really?”

“To this day.” Eyes glazed, he fingered the vial of nervesong. “I can still sense pressure. But physical discomfort has become a distant memory. Unless fate betrays me, one day Copernum will drink from this vial and learn of the pain he inflicted so casually.” Nedwin shook his head, returning to the present.

“I hope you pull it off,” Jason said. “Did you know Copernum tried to kill me?”

“I’m not surprised, considering how you humiliated the scoundrel. When I heard about your battle of wits, I laughed all day. If you had no other virtues, I would love you forever for the embarrassment you caused him.”

“It felt good to beat him,” Jason said. “I’m sorry to hear about your suffering.”

Nedwin shrugged, staring uncomfortably at the ground. “We all have misery to bear. I’m off to cover our tracks.” He swung up onto his horse and rode away.

After spreading out his blankets, Jason curled up on the ground. He tried not to dwell on all Nedwin had suffered. How could a person cope with so much torture? Jason thought about his own time at Felrook, locked within an iron shell fitted to his body. The memory made him sweat. How long could he have lasted? What else would have been in store? Thankfully, he had escaped before the worst ensued. He hoped he would never have to sample nervesong. Of course, if he were ever captured again, that might be exactly what he would have to face. Grim concerns slowed his ability to sleep.

A soft hand jostled Jason's shoulder. "Wake up, sleepyhead," said a familiar voice.

Startled awake, Jason blinked and squinted. By the light of the setting moon, he saw a pretty face hovering over his own, dark hair hanging a bit longer than he remembered. The face matched the voice. But how could Rachel be here? He scooted away from her, messing up his blankets. His first instinct was that the lurker must have caught up to him and invaded his dreams. Propped up on his elbows, he focused on her eyes. They weren't black. "Is that really you?" he asked in wonder.

She smiled and sat back. "Surprise."

He lunged forward, throwing his arms around her, partly to make sure she was real, partly out of sheer joy. She hugged him back. Holding her made her presence tangible. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Who found you?"

Several voices chuckled. Jason released the embrace, noticing for the first time the presence of Drake, Galloran, Dorsio, Aram, and Tark, all standing in a loose circle around where he had been sleeping. The unexpected audience made him awkwardly conscious of the exuberant hug.

"Drake and I found you guys," Rachel explained. She held up a little string. From the end of it dangled the Caberton signet ring.

"My ring," Jason said, reaching out a hand.

"Just a second," Rachel chided. "Notice anything unusual?"

He did. As she held the top of the string, the ring didn't hang straight down. The string hung at a slant, as if the ring were being magnetically drawn toward him. Not dramatically, but unmistakably.

"What?" Jason said, looking up at Galloran. "Is this some kind of homing ring?"

"It is now," Rachel said. "We met a lady who makes charms, and Drake had your ring, so she enchanted it to help us find you. It led us straight here."

“Wow! Did the lady come with you?”

Rachel shook her head. “She’s a wanderer. Sort of a hermit. She would have let me wander with her, but she had no intention of joining us.” Rachel produced a necklace of bead and bone and a few small feathers. “She gave me this for you. It should prevent lurkers from reaching out to your mind. She tailored a couple specifically for me and Drake. This one is more generic, but she thought it would work.”

“Does yours work?” Jason asked.

“We ditched a lurker right after we started using them. It had been after us for weeks.”

“I know of this charm woman,” Galloran said. “She has a true gift.”

Jason gazed at Rachel, still trying to accept that she was real. “How long have you been here?”

“Not long,” Rachel replied. “I could have let you sleep a little more. We’re not attacking the bridge until the moon sets. But I couldn’t wait.”

“Let’s give them a chance to talk,” Galloran suggested. “They have been apart for some time.”

He and the others moved away, not too far, but far enough for Jason and Rachel to speak unobserved. Jason stared at Rachel, the pretty missing girl with photos all over the Internet.

“So the Word didn’t work,” Rachel said softly.

“They already filled you in?”

“A little. You really made it home? Then came back?”

Jason started folding up his blankets, brushing off leaves and dirt as best he could. “I couldn’t stay there knowing you were here and that the Word was a fake. I know a way home now, in a cave near Felrook. It would be tricky to find it alone, but Ferrin could lead us straight there.”

“Did you check on my parents?” Rachel asked. “Did you let them know I’m alive?”

“Your parents have turned you into a national celebrity,” Jason said. “You’ve been all over the news, the Internet—you name it. Your mom and dad are anxiously looking for you. They’ve offered a big reward. But I couldn’t contact them. I’d mysteriously vanished the same day as you. I would have instantly become a suspect.”

Rachel fretted at her lower lip. “That makes sense. I knew they’d be so worried. I’m glad they’re looking. It means they still have hope. I’ve been gone so long.”

“It’s a little worse than you think,” Jason said. “The rate that time passes in our worlds doesn’t match up. It’s not way off, but when I got home, a few more weeks had gone by than I would have expected. And when I came back, less time had passed here than there.”

“So time goes by faster back home,” Rachel summarized.

“Seems like it,” Jason said.

“Then they think I’ve been gone even longer than I’d realized,” she said, rubbing her forehead. “I guess it’ll make the reunion that much sweeter when I make it back. Ferrin really rescued you?”

“Yeah. I guess they filled you in on that, too. Was he around when you got here?”

“He went with Nedwin and Chandra across the river. They stole a canoe. Galloran made it sound like you guys have him on some kind of leash.”

“Ferrin joined us voluntarily,” Jason said. “And he willingly gave Galloran a piece of his neck with an artery in it. He seems to have really joined our side.”

A little line appeared between Rachel’s eyebrows. “You think it’s for real?”

Jason shrugged. “My instincts say yes. He did everything Galloran asked, and had plenty of chances before that to turn me in.”

“We’re heading for the Sunken Lands?”

“Yep, then on to the Seven Vales to see if the Amar Kabal will help Galloran fight Maldor.”

Rachel nodded quietly. “You and Ferrin know a way home?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you thought about maybe ... I don’t know ...”

“Ditching everyone and having Ferrin take us to the cave?”

She shrugged.

Jason considered the idea. He had found Rachel. He had informed Galloran that the Word was phony. What more could he achieve by remaining in Lyrian? He was no warrior. This might be a smart time to bow out and let the experts run the rebellion.

Then again, he had a hard time picturing himself back home with so much left undone in Lyrian. He had managed to be useful so far. What if he could still make a difference here? Wouldn’t he always wonder how it all turned out?

“We’d have to fully trust Ferrin,” he said. “The way home is deep in enemy territory. We’d be at his mercy. Believe me, we don’t want to get caught.”

Rachel nodded. “I’m not saying we should try it. I’m mostly just glad to hear there’s a way. We can stress about it later. Looks like crossing this bridge has to

come before anything.” She stood and offered Jason a hand. He accepted it, and she helped him rise, his blankets tucked under one arm.

“I’m glad you found us,” Jason said. “I was so worried.”

“You were worried?” she replied, hitting him on the arm. “I thought you were being tortured inside of Felrook this whole time!”

Jason chuckled. “Since we split up, I’ve mostly been watching movies, playing video games, and reffing Little League.”

She swatted him again.

“Hey!” he complained, backing away. “It wasn’t my fault! I got back as soon as I could.”

Hands on her hips, her expression softened. “You did come back for me.”

By her tone of voice, he could tell she was thanking him. “What are friends for?” He wanted to pick her up and spin her around, he felt so relieved.

Tark came tromping over to them. “We’re going to start moving into position.”

“What’s the plan?” Jason asked.

“You, Rachel, and I will ride with Galloran and Dorsio. We’re in charge of the horses. We’ll each lead one.”

“Even Galloran?” Rachel asked.

“He’ll stay toward the rear during the charge,” Tark explained. “He’ll trust his horse to stay on the road and follow the others. He may be blind, but he’s an experienced rider.”

“We’re riding up along the road?” Jason asked.

“Drake and Aram will hit the bridge on this side, first with orantium, then with sword and bow. Nedwin, Ferrin, and Chandra will do the same on the far side of the bridge. If all goes as planned, the fight should be over by the time we reach the bridge.”

“We’re just the getaway,” Rachel said.

Tark nodded.

“Can we blow the bridge after we cross?” Jason asked. “You know, mess up the pursuit?”

“Chandra asked the same thing,” Tark said. “The bridge was built to last. I agree with Aram and Ferrin that the orantium explosives aren’t strong enough to bring it down, at least not without some prep work. Give me three days and some tools, it might be a different story.”

“How do we know when to move?” Jason asked.

“The others will strike right after the moon sets,” Tark related. “We start for the bridge when we hear the first explosion. If needed, we’ll help mop up when we get there.”

Tark led them over to the horses. Dorsio and Galloran sat astride their mounts, each holding a lead to another horse.

“Crazy about Aram,” Rachel said.

“The giant thing?” Jason checked.

“Makes me wonder what else we don’t know about the types of people in this world.”

Jason nodded. “After the lurkers, I think I’ve learned enough.”

“Shall we move into position?” Galloran asked.

Jason, Tark, and Rachel mounted up. Tark explained which horse each of them would be taking, giving the appropriate lead to Jason and to Rachel. Jason had Chandra’s horse. Dorsio led the way at a cautious pace, Galloran near him. Tark brought up the rear. By the time they reached a clearing beside a wide road, the moon was about to touch the horizon.

Galloran shifted on his horse beside Jason. “If all goes as planned,” Galloran said, “six orantium spheres should detonate simultaneously, demolishing the manglers. Each attacker will throw one, and Drake will throw two. If our attackers shield their eyes correctly, the blinded guardsmen will be left vulnerable. A second volley of orantium should wipe out most of the remaining defenders. The rest will fall by more conventional means.”

Jason visualized the scenario. “Sounds airtight.”

“It doesn’t take a genius to plan a perfect assault,” Galloran said. “The trouble tends to show up during the execution.”

The waning moon was halfway below the horizon and slowly melting from sight. Dorsio led them onto the road. The bridge was visible less than a mile away, a pair of large cressets burning at either end. As a group, the horses started walking toward the bridge.

Jason felt butterflies inside his stomach. He tried to tell himself that his part in this was simple. Follow Dorsio to the bridge. What could go wrong? Well, they could get to the bridge, find Aram and Drake dead and manglers waiting to chop them into taco meat while guards shot arrows from covered positions. Jason debated whether he should get out an orantium sphere of his own. He decided against it, since he would have his hands full trying to steer his own horse and lead another. The last thing he needed was to drop a sphere and blow himself up. Sometimes the best offense was avoiding self-destruction.

The moon disappeared below the horizon. Up ahead, white flashes blazed at either end of the bridge, the thunder of the explosions following a few seconds later. Jason's horse sidestepped and whinnied, but thankfully didn't go berserk.

Dorsio spurred his horse to a canter. Jason flicked the reins, and his horse followed. He kept a firm hand on the lead of Chandra's horse. A second round of detonations strobed on the bridge, a little less simultaneous this time, the fiery whiteness reflecting off rising clouds of smoke. The resultant booming sounded like three or four cannons, fired in rapid succession.

Jason focused on staying with Dorsio and keeping his horses under control. If Galloran could do it blind, he had no excuse to mess up.

The bridge passed out of sight, obscured by trees. As the road rounded the trees, the near side of the bridge came back into view, one of the cressets still burning. Aram and Drake stood off to one side of the road. Tark and Rachel slowed up to pass the men their horses.

Staying with Galloran and Dorsio, Jason rode onto the bridge. He smelled charred stone and metal and flesh. The twisted husks of manglers lay in smoldering ruins, along with several fallen guardsmen. Jason felt a pang of regret at the sight of the slain soldiers. At the same time, he knew that they supported an evil cause. Given the chance, none of them would have hesitated to kill him or his friends.

Jason loped across the bridge. Both cressets still burned on the far side. More demolished manglers and slaughtered soldiers lay in disarray, along with fragments of metal and blackened stone. Nedwin, Ferrin, and Chandra awaited them at the side of the road beyond the bridge. Jason slowed beside Chandra, who sprang onto her horse with wiry skill.

"I'll grant Galloran one thing," Ferrin said cheerily. "The man knows how to throw a party." He was the only person who had not yet mounted his horse. He walked it over to the guardhouse, took the dagger from a fallen guardsman, and used it to tack a piece of parchment to the door.

"What does it say?" Jason asked.

"Down with Maldor, down with his puppets, down with his empire," Nedwin recited. "Warmest regards, Ferrin, son of Baldor."

"I composed it myself," Ferrin said. "Best I could manage on short notice. With more time, I might have devised a rhyme." He mounted his horse as Tark, Rachel, Aram, and Drake rode up.

"The village?" Galloran asked.

“Looks quiet for now,” Nedwin replied. “I drugged the horses at the garrison, as well as many of the privately owned mounts on this side of the river. We should enjoy an advantageous head start.”

“Well done, everyone,” Galloran said, holding out the lead for his own horse until Dorsio took it. “Off we go.”

Jason nudged his horse forward, riding between Tark and Rachel. The excitement of the decisive victory and the promise of vengeful imperial pursuers left his senses thrillingly alert. As their horses pounded through the night, he gazed up at the countless stars overhead, so numerous that it looked impossible to create constellations in all the clutter.

“I’ll rejoin you at Three Peaks,” Nedwin called, veering off the road to the right.

Jason and the others stayed on the road for perhaps ten minutes before turning off into a field. Ferrin had the lead. Aram brought up the rear.

As Jason cantered beside Rachel, he could hardly believe that against all odds they were together again. Rocking in time with his horse, cool wind on his face, he squinted ahead at Dorsio and Galloran, then back at Tark and Aram, dim shapes in the starlight. He doubted whether he and Rachel would be safer anywhere in Lyrian. They rode with cunning adventurers who knew how to fight and forage, who could probably survive for as long as necessary on the run. Racing through the night, in spite of his hardships, Jason felt gratitude and relief. A mighty emperor might be hunting him, but at least he wasn’t alone.



# HUNTED

Toward the end of the second day after fleeing from the bridge, deep in rugged, hilly country, Jason rode his horse over the lip of a roundish valley. A lake filled the bottom of the depression, the water interrupted by a large, wooded island crudely shaped like a horseshoe.

Drake led the way down to the edge of the lake, then rode out onto the water. Instead of becoming immersed, the horse never sank deep enough for the water to touch Drake's boots.

"Shallow lake?" Jason asked Ferrin.

"I've never been here," Ferrin replied, "but Drake was telling me there are three ways to the island: broad way, narrow way, and crooked way. The rest of the lake is quite deep, but three submerged ridges allow access from the shore to anyone who knows the secret and doesn't mind wading."

Jason and Ferrin found themselves at the rear of the group, following the other riders out onto the lake. Looking down, Jason noticed that the water was a murky green. He couldn't see far below the surface.

"A wizard once called this island home," Galloran commented over his shoulder, apparently having overheard the conversation. "The valley is difficult to find unless you know the way."

The nine riders reached the island and trotted inland from the shore. Toward the center of the island, Drake brought them to a clearing ringed by tall pines with scaly bark. A large stone cottage and a few smaller outbuildings stood in various stages of disrepair. The cottage lacked a door and had lost most of one wall. The windows had no glass. Part of the roof remained. A pair of young trees grew out of the roofless portion.

"After dark we can build a fire in the cottage," Drake said. "We could all use a full night's rest and some hot food."

"Couldn't we get cornered here?" Aram asked.

"I know all three ways off this island," Drake said. "We've seen no sign of anyone tracking us, and this valley is isolated and elusive."

“Good enough for me,” Aram replied, dismounting.

Nobody else raised objections.

While Jason was unpacking his blankets, Rachel came over. She placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, “I want to show you something.”

Curious, he followed her over to one of the crumbling outbuildings. Little more than a pair of adjacent walls remained. Rachel led Jason to the corner where the two walls met, shielding them from view.

“Check this out,” Rachel said, taking a candle from her pocket. She held it up and mumbled a short phrase, and a flame came to life. She shielded the fire with her hand.

“How’d you do that?” Jason asked, impressed. He hadn’t recognized the words she spoke, yet somehow he instinctively understood they pertained to gathering heat.

“Edomic,” she replied. “I can teach you.”

“Who taught you?”

“Drake showed me how to light fires. Then the charm lady taught me some other things. It isn’t too hard once you get the hang of it.”

Jason blew out the candle. “Do it again.”

She mumbled the phrase, and the flame returned.

“You just say the words?” Jason verified.

“Partly. The words ask heat to gather. But you have to put your will behind the words and sort of force the heat to obey.”

Jason held out a hand. “Let me try.”

She blew out the flame and handed him the candle, then slowly and clearly told him the words.

“It sounds like you’re singing them,” Jason said.

“You don’t have to be loud about it,” Rachel said. “But the pitch does matter. The charm woman said some wizards used to get results just by speaking the words in their minds. But you still need to pronounce everything correctly.”

They repeated the words back and forth. Rachel made little corrections in his inflections. “This seems a lot harder than saying the Word.”

“It is,” Rachel said. “The charm woman explained it to me. The Word was as close to nonsense as Edomic gets. It was just a password, a trigger, to set a prearranged enchantment into motion. It was deliberately simple. Many Edomic words can’t be written with English phonetics. She said the only complicated part would have been designing the Word to erase itself from memory.”

Jason kept working to perfect the phrase to summon heat. Finally Rachel approved. He repeated the phrase a few times.

“You’ve got it,” Rachel said. “Now focus on the candle, say the words, and demand them to be fulfilled.”

Jason stared at the candle. He imagined the flame flickering to life, spoke the phrase, and focused on the wick, willing it to burn. After a prolonged mental effort, nothing happened. His gaze switched to Rachel. “What did I do wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “Make sure you imagine the heat responding and gathering. It’s sort of like making a wish. Have you ever wished for something so hard that it’s almost like you’re trying to force it to come true?”

“Sure,” he said.

“It’s kind of like that, except this actually works. Speak the command, then back it up with mental effort. Make the heat fulfill your words.”

He tried several more times with no effect. “Am I pronouncing the words right?”

“Sounds right to me. And the meaning is coming through.”

“Weird how I don’t know the words, but I can feel the meaning.”

“Edomic is like that. It’s very exact. Everything understands it intuitively. But knowing the words to speak isn’t intuitive. You have to learn them.”

Jason spoke the phrase again, putting emotion into his voice, then throwing all his mental energy at the wick, as if he truly believed that pure desire could start a fire. As before, he didn’t get a single spark or a wisp of smoke. “You do it again,” he said.

Rachel spoke the words, and the flame came to life.

Jason looked around suspiciously. “Is this some kind of trick?”

“No way. How would I make a candle spontaneously light itself?”

“I don’t know. It just feels like a trick. How long did it take you to learn this?”

“I lit the candle on my first try, after Drake described how. I’d seen him do it several times. My first time, it took a few seconds of pushing to get it right. Now it seems effortless.”

“Drake can do this too?” Jason asked.

“Yes. Although I’m already at least as good as him. And I can do some other things that he can’t. The charm woman said I’m a natural.”

“You truly have a gift,” said Chandra, stepping around from the other side of the wall. “I could feel the power in your words.”

“How long were you listening?” Jason challenged, embarrassed about his many failed attempts.

“I don’t make it a habit to eavesdrop on comrades,” she apologized. “Galloran felt Rachel speaking Edomic and sent me to watch. Drake told him about your talent, and he’s most intrigued.”

This was the most Jason had ever heard Chandra speak. “What do you mean he felt her speaking?”

“He could feel the effect of her words,” Chandra said. “The change her words were causing, the power she was mustering with her will. To a lesser extent I could sense it as well.”

“Do you speak Edomic too?” Rachel asked.

“A smattering,” Chandra replied. “I mostly know how to move things.”

“Like telling animals to move?” Rachel asked.

“No, I’ve never grasped the nuances of suggestion. I can’t work with intellects. I mean physically moving objects by command.”

“Show us,” Jason invited.

Chandra scanned the ground. “This place amplifies Edomic commands. You can almost taste it. The charged atmosphere, rich with energy. It must be why the old wizard chose to live here. You were tapping into a lot of power, Rachel, although you used only a small portion.” She extended her hand toward a stone block that probably would have been too heavy for anyone but Aram to lift. She sang a quick phrase, and it shuddered. She repeated the effort, and it rocked. Her face contorted with effort, and on the third try, her words tipped it onto its side.

“Cool!” Jason said.

“It’s normally hard to budge anything bigger than you can move with your muscles,” Chandra said. “I can feel that my Edomic has more clout than usual here.” She extended an arm forward and issued a command, and a stone the size of a hockey puck leaped into her callused hand.

“You spoke directly to the stone,” Rachel noted. “You didn’t call a force to push it. You just told it where to go.”

“Observant,” Chandra said. “I name the object or the material I mean to move, then tell it where to move by speaking a command and visualizing a trajectory. I can’t tell you why it works. My mother had the same knack, as did her mother as well. I’ve been doing it since childhood.”

“Can I try?” Rachel said.

“Be my guest,” Chandra replied, folding her thin, sinewy arms. “Do you need me to repeat the phrase?”

“I think I have it,” Rachel said.

“Then try to push something.” Based on her stance and expression, Jason thought that Chandra expected Rachel to have trouble.

Rachel extended her hand toward the same stone block Chandra had tipped, focused on it, and said the words. The block flipped end over end, tumbling heavily across the grassy ground, crashing against irregularities in the terrain before wobbling to a rest twenty yards away.

Chandra gasped, wide eyes darting from the block to Rachel and then back. “You were having sport with me. You’ve done this before.”

Rachel smiled self-consciously, clearly pleased and embarrassed. “I’ve been practicing other types of Edomic,” she explained. “But I’ve never done this. I pushed as hard as I could, because the block seemed so heavy.”

“Even in an ideal location such as this,” Galloran said, coming around from behind one of the walls, feeling his way with a walking stick, “you mustered significant power.”

“How could you tell?” Rachel asked.

“I didn’t see the stone, but I could sense the energy you brought to bear and perceive the force that shoved it. And I heard it roll. How long have you been practicing Edomic?”

“Maybe five weeks.”

Chandra huffed. “Unbelievable.”

“She hasn’t been in our world more than a few months,” Galloran reminded the cook. “Rachel, I understand you can call fire with considerable aptitude.”

“And I can give directions to animals. And I helped the charm woman enchant a decoy doll to fool the lurker.”

Galloran rubbed his lips. “I take it you have not encountered an Edomic phrase that you could not employ.”

“Not yet,” Rachel agreed. “There are limits to what I can do with any phrase.”

Galloran smiled. “We have a true adept in our midst. Rachel, your natural gift is the material from which wizards are made.”

“The charm woman thought so too. She wanted me to be her apprentice.”

Galloran nodded. “She could have taught you many things. Ideally, you would be apprenticed to a true wizard—one who could school you in the finer points of Edomic. Sadly, with Maldor representing the last of his order, no such

teacher remains. Rachel, an innate faculty for Edomic is so rare that we may have found why the oracle wanted you here. Simply by mastering the limited phrases that have survived as a kind of folk magic, through practice, you could become formidable.”

“Why do you think I’m here?” Jason asked.

Galloran chuckled. “We already have our proof through your deeds, Lord Jason. You discovered that the Word is a fraud. That act alone makes your contribution incalculable.”

“Does that mean my part is done?” he wondered.

Galloran pondered the question. “You want to know if you can go home?”

“No,” Jason said reflexively, ashamed to look like a coward in front of a man like Galloran. “I mean, well, we had thought about it.”

“Ferrin knows a way to the Beyond,” Rachel said.

Galloran nodded. “As I have expressed before, I wouldn’t blame either of you for going home if you find a way. Nor would I have blamed you for staying there, Jason, had you done so.”

“I couldn’t help overhearing,” Ferrin said, approaching the conversation. “We know a way to the Beyond, but Maldor is aware that we know. In my efforts to ferret out what Maldor suspects, I learned that the investigation surrounding your escape led trackers to the cave. The entrance will now be sealed and guarded. There will be walls and locks and numerous redundancies. Maldor knows the secret is out, which means that from now on he will rely on strength to protect his gateway to your world. The cave lies in the shadow of Felrook, where he can access nearly limitless resources to protect it. The day may come when we could go there, but it would require significant reconnaissance and preparation. Otherwise we’ll march straight into captivity.”

Jason felt some of his hopes wither. Ferrin was right. As the most wanted criminals in Lyrian, they couldn’t hastily travel to the center of Maldor’s power and expect to access a heavily guarded location. Glancing at Rachel, Jason could tell she had reached the same conclusion.

“Don’t lose heart,” Galloran said. “I vow that when the time is right, I will do everything in my power to get you both back to the Beyond. In truth, the biggest obstacle was finding a way. The only remaining hurdle will be formulating a workable strategy.”

“If our rebellion succeeds,” Chandra said, “they would have easy access.”

“Perhaps even before then,” Galloran said. “For now, we will try to survive until we reach the Seven Vales. One crisis at a time. Chandra, I want you and

Rachel to spend every waking moment together. Teach her all you know about Edomic. Help her continue to develop, and make sure she understands the danger of failed commands.”

“It will be done,” Chandra said.

“Jason, I want you to start learning to use that sword. You are surrounded by superior tutors.”

“I’d like that,” Jason said.

“I’ll mentor him,” Ferrin pledged.

“Off to it then,” Galloran said. “Let the others set up camp.”

The next morning, not long after the nine riders left the valley, Nedwin found them. Ferrin had been scouting ahead, and he returned to the group with the lanky redhead riding close behind.

“Nedwin!” Galloran welcomed. “I thought we were to meet at Three Peaks.”

“I came south from there, hoping to intercept you,” Nedwin replied. “A massive ambush awaits near Three Peaks, staged across all four southern valleys.”

“You made it to Whitelake?” Galloran asked.

“Yes. The lake was taxing, but I crossed.”

“Malar?”

“I discovered his lifeless head in a pool of cold water. He had been drowned. He would have been defenseless. I doubt he died more than a day or two before my arrival.”

Galloran’s expression tightened painfully. “Tell me more about the ambush. Were you spotted?”

“I avoided detection. They had a massive host entrenched, cunningly disguised, as if certain of our imminent arrival. Archers, manglers, cavalry—you name it.”

“We would have arrived by late afternoon,” Galloran said numbly.

Holding a finger to his lips, Ferrin guided his horse over to Galloran. “A lurker must have been eavesdropping. We’ll loop around to the west. We may want to consider revising our entire strategy. Who knows what plans have been compromised?” He reached out and squeezed Galloran’s shoulder.

“Very well,” Galloran said decisively. “I’ll need some time to strategize. Perhaps we can make for Port Hamblin, try to solicit allies in Meridon. We’ll still want to send some messengers elsewhere. Give me time to mull this over.”

Ferrin dismounted, a finger still to his lips, and tugged Galloran's sleeve. Galloran dismounted and accompanied Ferrin. Dorsio followed them silently. They moved into the trees out of earshot, and did not return for several minutes.

When they came back, Ferrin motioned for Jason to join him. The displacer kept a finger to his lips. Jason remained silent.

Once they were separated from the group, Ferrin combed probing fingers through Jason's hair, then meticulously inspected his face. Ferrin pulled Jason's eyelids uncomfortably open and peered into his mouth. After miming for Jason to take off his shirt, Ferrin closely and carefully examined his body, like a doctor giving a physical.

"You're not the problem," Ferrin finally said.

"Can we talk now?" Jason asked, putting his shirt back on.

"I inspected Galloran and Dorsio," Ferrin said. "Neither of them had invasive graftings either."

"Graftings?"

"Meaning that no displacers had attached unwelcome body parts to them. Replaced an eye. Added an ear. There is a risk that any prisoner of Maldor could end up with a secret grafting. If a displacer's eye were exchanged for one of yours while you were unconscious, the eye would function and feel just like your own. Except the displacer would see through it as well."

"It might not be a grafting," Jason said. "You may have been right about a lurker overhearing us."

"Galloran can sense lurkers," Ferrin replied. "After I checked him for graftings, he confirmed that none have come near us. Besides, lurkers aren't known for sharing detailed information. Either somebody has a grafting, or we have a deliberate traitor among us."

"Nedwin was imprisoned at Felrook."

"Galloran just told me Nedwin has a grafting. An eye on his hand, under the glove. Supposedly the glove has not been removed since he first met you. But he could always have another."

So that was what Nedwin had kept hidden under his glove! A grafted eye. "Tark?" Jason said.

"Doubtful. He was only imprisoned at Harthenham. Nobody would have expected him to leave, so a grafting would probably not be wasted on him. But I'll check everyone to be sure."

"I'm clean?"



“Yes,” Ferrin said. “I’ll check Nedwin next. Keep quiet about all of this for now.”

“I will.”

Jason returned to the group, and Ferrin led away Nedwin. Ferrin returned alone and consulted quietly with Galloran. One by one, Ferrin led away the others, and one by one they came back. At the end, Ferrin gave Rachel a cursory exam without leading her away. Nedwin still had not returned.

“Nedwin has a false ear,” Ferrin reported at last. “It’s an almost perfect match in shape, size, and skin tone. Terrific work. Anything less than a thorough exam by a trained eye would miss it.”

“It explains much,” Galloran said. “The grafted ear must be how Maldor learned what information Tark had brought us from Jason. Also why the emperor moved against Jugard and Malar shortly before Nedwin arrived to retrieve them. Not to mention why our foes have put their recent efforts into the ambush.”

“Which would have succeeded had Nedwin not discovered it,” Ferrin said.

“Can you take off the ear?” Tark asked.

“I can. It shouldn’t even be too hard. As is common with ears, the grafting is shallow. The inner workings of the ear still belong to Nedwin.”

“Then how can the displacer hear with it?” Jason asked.

“The external portion of the ear gathers the sound vibrations,” Ferrin said. “While sharing the same outer ear, the inner ear of the displacer receives the same vibrations as Nedwin’s inner ear. When we remove the ear, Nedwin should manage to retain much of his hearing on that side.”

Rachel winced.

Jason rubbed his ear, trying not to wonder how it would feel to have it cut off.

“But we’ll wait to remove the ear,” Galloran said.

“We’ll keep Nedwin away from any serious discussions,” Ferrin said. “And we’ll do our best to stage planning sessions full of misinformation.”

“You two already started,” Rachel said.

“Right,” Ferrin said. “Thankfully Galloran followed my lead.”

“Then we’ll be looping around Three Peaks to the east,” Aram said.

“And going nowhere near Port Hamblin,” Ferrin confirmed. “We’ll still proceed with caution, in case the displacer realizes that we’ve caught on.”

“You’ve done us a great service, Ferrin,” Galloran said. “Had that ear gone undetected, it could have undone us. Thank you.”

“Just doing my job,” Ferrin replied. “I’ve already explained the situation to Nedwin by whispering in his authentic ear. He’s been serving as a scout, and he should simply continue in that role. It will keep him far from our more delicate conversations.”

“We’ll proceed to the Sunken Lands as previously planned,” Galloran said. “But we’ll mask our movements with a persistent flow of misleading conversations. We should get underway. Given the forces awaiting us, we’re closer to Three Peaks than I would prefer.”

Several days later, Jason stood before Ferrin, gripping his sword in a sweaty palm. They faced each other in a clearing encompassed by tall trees. Daylight was waning. While he worked with Ferrin, and Rachel practiced with Chandra, the others were setting up camp.

“You really want me to attack?” Jason asked.

So far their sparring sessions had entailed Jason learning footwork while defending himself against a blunted practice sword Galloran had lent to Ferrin. The dummy blades were made of metal, and it hurt when Ferrin poked or clipped him.

“You’ve been waiting for this,” Ferrin said, swishing his practice sword. “Attack me with all you have. Give no thought to defense. I won’t bruise you. Mark me if you can.”

Unlike previous practices, today Jason held his real sword. Ferrin had insisted that as a displacer, he could avoid serious wounds from an edged weapon.

Implementing the stance Ferrin had taught him, Jason balanced himself, knees slightly bent, ready to move in any direction. “I just come at you?”

“With everything you have. You’ve been asking me to let you attack. Here’s your opportunity.”

“Lop off his head, Jason!” Aram called.

Jason edged forward warily.

“I’m on the defensive,” Ferrin reminded him. “You must bring the fight to me.”

Jason nervously chewed the lining of his mouth. He wished Aram weren’t watching. He began tentatively, somewhat concerned about injuring his teacher.

“This is embarrassing,” Ferrin goaded, slapping Jason’s sword aside.

Jason put more power into his swings, and his sword began to clash with Ferrin’s, the blades ringing through the clearing.

“Attack *me*, not my sword,” Ferrin said.

That proved tricky, since the sword was always in the way.

“Don’t fret about a counterattack,” Ferrin encouraged. “Take advantage of the situation. Use reckless abandon. I will not strike at you.”

Jason pressed in closer, hacking wildly. The displacer stood his ground, deflecting blows directed at his neck, chest, and legs. Jason broke his rhythm of chopping and suddenly lunged forward, stabbing at Ferrin’s heart. The displacer casually parried the thrust.

“Better,” Ferrin said. “Now show me some real vigor.”

Jason charged, his blade hissing through the air. Instead of intercepting the blow with his sword, the displacer dodged away. Jason stayed after him. Relying on clever footwork and feinting, Ferrin evaded every swing without using his sword. Jason began to tire.

“Are you appreciating the beauty of defensive footwork?” Ferrin asked.

Jason nodded, brushing sweaty strands of hair away from his eyes.

“Had enough?” Ferrin inquired. “This may be the only time I allow you to engage me recklessly.”

Forgetting all caution, ignoring proper footwork, Jason rushed the displacer, getting so close before swinging that he could not imagine the displacer merely dodging the blow. But Ferrin ducked and spun away. Jason kept after him, grunting as he wielded his sword like a baseball bat, swinging relentlessly.

Finally compelled to use his sword again, Ferrin deflected the mighty strokes. “You have strength,” the displacer conceded. “Issue blows like that, and an unprepared opponent might drop his weapon.”

Jason kept coming. Eluding an overzealous swing, the displacer patted Jason on the shoulder. “Of course, swinging too hard can also leave you defenseless.”

After a final energetic onslaught, Jason stepped back, panting. “I’m done.”

“You showed tenacity,” Ferrin said.

“You were impossible to touch.”

“I was entirely on the defensive. I could have held you off all night. Or slain you any number of times. The best openings often occur when an opponent is on the offensive. Go practice footwork.”

Jason felt silly, dancing around alone with his sword, going through all the drills Ferrin had taught him. He took some relief in the fact that Lyrian had no video recorders or Internet connections.

It had been fun attacking Ferrin. Jason wished he could have surprised him by penetrating his defenses, but consoled himself that his inability to do so was

evidence that he was learning from the best. The displacer really was a great teacher: patient, direct, specific, and very knowledgeable. Drake and Aram had provided pointers as well, but Ferrin had proved to be the most thorough and methodical instructor and had supervised most of the tutoring.

While working in solitude on his swordsmanship, Jason glanced over to where Rachel and Chandra were using Edomic to break dead tree limbs. Before going to sleep at night, Jason privately kept trying to ignite dry twigs or leaves with the phrase Rachel had taught him, but had never even made anything warm. He had temporarily worried that perhaps the Word had failed against Maldor due to his lack of ability, but then he remembered that all of the syllables had vanished from memory after he spoke them together, so he must have said it well enough.

Sweaty and tired, Jason finally quit his exercises, joining the others around a small fire. Drake, Ferrin, and Nedwin had proved so adept at steering the group away from enemies that Jason often forgot they were on the run.

Aram sat, meticulously honing his sword. Dorsio reclined beside Galloran, the two of them eating dried meat and dense bread. Ferrin warmed a skewer of vegetables over the fire. Scowling, Tark whittled, cross-legged on a blanket. Drake leaned against a tree, eyes half closed, irises sliding eerily back and forth. From experience, Jason knew that the trancelike state was as close as seedmen came to sleeping. Nedwin was away scouting. Rachel and Chandra had yet to stop practicing.

After rummaging through a bag for food, Jason plopped down beside Tark, chewing salty meat. Tark held up a mangled block of wood. "It was going to be a duck. I may have to settle for a cube."

"Or a headless duck," Jason said, "without legs or wings."

Tark dropped the wood in disgust. "I wish I had my sousalax."

"You're the only one," Ferrin chuckled.

"I'll second Tark's wish," Aram said, sliding a stone along his blade. "He could give me more lessons."

"Lessons?" Ferrin groaned, covering his ears.

"I was getting good," Aram protested. "Tell him, Tark."

Tark chose his words carefully. "You were ... one of the few men I have met with the capacity to sound the instrument."

"I wasn't good?"

"Good takes practice."

"I was loud."

“True,” Tark said. “I revoke my wish.”

“Not many men can blow a sousalax,” Ferrin said. “How did you get started?”

Tark grinned. “In my youth I worked as a diver at Ithilum. The job strengthened my lungs.” Tark puffed out his chest, pounding his ribs.

“I’m certain our enemies would gladly furnish any of us with an instrument,” Galloran said. “We’ve been hard to find.”

On a muggy morning, below an overcast sky, the ten riders reached boggy terrain. They had approached the Sunken Lands from a different direction than Jason had previously used with Jasher and Rachel, but the soupy marshland looked equally dreary.

Drake called a halt. Nedwin walked out of earshot as Drake explained that the horses would not be able to continue.

“Let’s strip any necessary gear,” Galloran suggested. “We won’t be back this way. Our path will take us beyond the Sunken Lands to the Seven Vales.”

“Maybe I could talk to the horses,” Rachel offered. “Try to send them around to the other side.”

Galloran dismounted. “We’re approaching the Sunken Lands from the southwest and intend to exit from the northwest. But the horses can’t go around to the west. They will find the mountains as impassable as the marshland. I suppose they could try to loop around to the east. It will amount to a long journey through dangerous country.”

“What if a couple of us herd the horses around?” Chandra said. “We might be glad to have them on the far side.”

Galloran shook his head. “I don’t want to risk losing anyone. Even by horseback, the journey will probably take too long. The horses would have to circumnavigate three quarters of the swamp in the time it takes us to cut across part of it. Besides, Maldor has strongholds east of the marshlands.”

“The western gate to the Seven Vales does not lie far north of the swamp,” Drake said. “On foot the journey will cost us only two days.”

“If we’re not sending anyone with them,” Rachel proposed, “I might as well try to convince the horses to loop around and meet us.”

“What if an enemy follows them?” Chandra asked.

“Nobody would suspect the riderless horses had a destination,” Ferrin said. “Any who find them will just try to take possession of them.”

“Very well,” Galloran said. “Give it a try, Rachel.”

“Put some extra effort into telling Mandibar,” Drake said. “I’d hate to lose him.”

Jason sidled over to Rachel as the others transferred gear. “Can you do that?” he asked quietly. “Tell them to come?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered back. “I know how to ask the horses to meet me. I’d have more confidence if I could accurately visualize our destination. But I’ve never been there. I’m going to picture us crossing the swamp by boat, and the horses running around to the east, and them finding us on the northwest side. We’ll see what happens.”

Jason watched Rachel move from horse to horse, stroking them and speaking to each one individually. When all of the desired gear was unpacked, she made a general declaration to all of the horses. Jason sensed that she was telling them to run eastward. Moving in a group, they galloped in the correct direction.

“What about Nedwin?” Ferrin asked. “There are many distinctive sounds in the swamp that may reveal our location. Has the time come to lose his ear?”

“I think so,” Galloran said. “Can you manage it?”

“Among his ingredients, Nedwin has salves for burns and infections,” Ferrin said. “He claims to feel no pain, so I’ll use a hot knife. We’ll poke out the eye on his hand while we’re at it. I’ll pretend like I’m just discovering the ear, in hopes they might continue to trust the nonsense he’s been hearing lately.”

Galloran nodded silently.

Jason felt chills as Ferrin strode away, drawing a knife. He was glad he wouldn’t have to watch.

Ferrin and Nedwin returned perhaps an hour later. A bandage around Nedwin’s hand had replaced his glove, and he also wore a bandage tied to the side of his head. He smiled, revealing hideous teeth. Jason realized his teeth must have been deliberately damaged while he was a prisoner.

“I injected nervesong into the eye and the ear just before the surgery,” Nedwin reported. “It meant I felt some pain when Ferrin cut and burned me, but not nearly what the displacers felt on their end.”

“Once the ear was amputated, I administered poison to it,” Ferrin said. “The displacer severed his connection. Hard to say whether he did it in time.”

Nedwin could not stop grinning. “At the very least, a pair of spies just had very bad days.”

# GRULLIONS

Perched atop a boulder at the edge of the swamp, Rachel watched for snakes. She had seen far too many as she and her companions had squelched across the marsh for the last two days. Big ones and small ones, fat ones and thin ones, light ones and dark ones, striped ones and solid ones and patterned ones. A poisonous snake had struck Dorsio's boot twice, the fangs failing to penetrate. A nonpoisonous snake had bitten Nedwin on the wrist. Drake had killed at least three venomous snakes as they slithered into camp while the group slept.

At the moment, the only way for a snake to reach her would be to climb across a steep expanse of bare stone. She had a long stick ready, just in case.

Her current vantage point commanded a depressing view of the muddy shore where the sucking marshland gave way to the black water of the swamp. A miasmatic haze had muted the recent sunrise. Tall trees grew up out of the water, widespread branches interlocking like great umbrellas. Bedraggled foliage hung in long streamers from trunks and limbs. In the distance a ponderous slug, longer than her arm, slurped across an island of mulch, eyestalks stretching grotesquely.

If Rachel had been allowed to pick one place in Lyrian never to revisit, without pause she would have selected the Sunken Lands. Only poisonous, diseased, disgusting threats lurked in the gloom ahead, including predatory slime, supersized insects, stealthy serpents, and elephantine frogs.

Two crafts awaited on the shore. The sleek skiff looked large enough to accommodate six. The wide canoe could carry no more than three. There was no way to proceed without boats, but fortunately the Amar Kabal routinely hid vessels along the shore of the swamp. Drake had found one, Nedwin the other. Assisted by Ferrin and Dorsio, both were currently off seeking a third craft.

Rachel wished she could have stayed with the horses. No soldiers would have caught her. In an emergency, she could have transferred to Mandibar. With her ability to issue Edomic instructions, she felt certain she could have led them safely around the swamp. After weeks of riding, she had formed a connection with her mare, and hated the possibility of never seeing her again.

Jason came traipsing toward her boulder, boots cumbersome with mud, one hand on the hilt of his sword. She had noticed that as he kept practicing, he seemed increasingly proud of the weapon. He looked up at her. "You might be safe from snakes, but you're going to fall and break your neck."

The boulder was steep on all sides. Climbing it had required some effort. "I was trying to get away from the smell." After sucking gel from orchid buds, her body odor had been magnified, transforming her into human insect repellent. But that was nothing compared to how terrible the others stank.

"Not a bad reason," Jason conceded. "Nedwin is heading this way with another canoe. We're going to leave soon."

Looking over, Rachel saw Galloran and the others gathering near the watercrafts. Nedwin and Dorsio glided into view, paddling a canoe and leaving a V-shaped wake across the murky water.

"Think Corinne is all right?" Rachel wondered.

Jason glanced toward Galloran. "I don't know. Two of the syllable guardians are already dead. It looks bad. I can tell Galloran is worried."

"The mushrooms should give her some protection. It's got to be hard to kill somebody when you can't remember why you're there."

"Let's hope so."

Rachel turned around and carefully lowered herself down the least sheer side of the boulder. Jason waited for her, and they walked over to the muddy bank.

"We're here," Jason said as Nedwin and Dorsio brought the canoe ashore. All of the others had already gathered.

Galloran raised both hands. "This is a hazardous time of year to enter the swamp. The fungi will be in full bloom, disease will be rampant, and the insects are multiplying. Within a few weeks, the swamp will be utterly impassable for more than a month, during the height of insect season."

"Bind your noses and mouths with rags to filter the air," Drake said, passing out lengths of fabric. "Never inhale without them. At this time of year, airborne spores will readily infect unprotected lungs."

"They should add that to the travel brochure," Jason murmured to Rachel while wrapping fabric over his nose and mouth. "Who doesn't want some tasty lung fungus?"

"Fun for the whole family," she muttered back.

Galloran assigned Tark and Chandra to one canoe, and Ferrin and Drake to the other, leaving everyone else to fill the skiff. Drake, Nedwin, Ferrin, and Tark helped push the vessels into the water. Each canoe had two paddles. In the



skiff, Dorsio and Nedwin manned the oars. Aram placed a hand on the tiller. Jason and Rachel sat in the prow to scout for slime.

The skiff surged ahead, pushing ripples across the dark water. Before long, Rachel began to notice dull orange masses of fungus, clinging to the tree trunks like wasp hives, giving them an ailing appearance. Cylindrical piles of spongy fungi thrived on decaying islands of muck. Slick puddles of slime rippled across the surface of the water or oozed over obstacles. Jason and Rachel gave directions when necessary to help the skiff avoid the carnivorous slime.

From above and to one side, Rachel heard a startling gasp. The inhalation was followed by a sharp hiss, like air expelled from a blowhole, and a plume of maroon gas jetted from a bloated clump of yellowish fungus, high on a tree.

“Avoid the spores,” Galloran cautioned, as if he could see the powdery cloud spreading above them.

Fumbling momentarily, Nedwin and Dorsio turned the skiff and propelled it away from the drifting spray. The canoes also paddled away from the descending spores.

As they progressed deeper into the swamp, the trees grew taller, lifting the tangled canopy ever higher. The gasp-hiss of fungi excreting spores became frequent. Rachel began to glimpse snakes gliding through the water.

Rachel did her best to ignore the multitudes of spiders, slugs, snakes, and flying insects as she scanned for slime. Her efforts did not keep her from noticing slender dragonflies as long as her forearm, prowling snakes with heads the size of footballs, gooey slugs big enough to wear saddles, and hairy spiders large enough to prey on housecats.

Aram grew at sunset, limbs lengthening and thickening. Since she knew it embarrassed him, Rachel tried not to stare, but it was hard not to peek at something so unusual. After he finished growing, the skiff floated noticeably lower with his added weight. He took both of the oars, and the skiff whooshed forward faster than ever. When the canoes floundered behind, unable to equal the energetic pace, Aram slowed.

“Watch for a place to camp,” Galloran said.

“Why not go all night?” Aram suggested.

“The swamp slumbers during the day. Dangerous creatures patrol the waters after dark. We’ll increase our chances of survival if we spend the night in our boats, up on an island.”

As the swamp dimmed, they pulled the boats up on one of the largest islands they had seen all day, arranging the crafts close together. In the fading light,

luminous thumb-size slugs became visible on the trees.

Jason commented on the slugs.

“This portion of the swamp glows all night,” Nedwin confirmed. “By tomorrow evening, we should reach the section of the swamp controlled by the frogs. Few slugs survive there.”

Nedwin handed out orchid buds. Rachel eagerly consumed the flavorless gel inside. Her horrible odor was much better than stings or bites from prehistoric insects.

The clamor of the swamp began as Rachel curled up in the bottom of the skiff, uncomfortable but exhausted. Crickets chirped so noisily, the skiff seemed full of them. From up in the trees came warbling hoots and staccato bursts of clacking. Occasionally she heard long, low moans in the distance. But without the barking croaks of the huge frogs, the night was not quite so uproarious as her previous experience in the swamp.

As always, Drake took watch, since he never truly slept. The slugs seemed ever brighter as the rest of the swamp faded to true darkness.

With predawn light filtering through the canopy, Nedwin jostled the others awake. They intended to set off early to take advantage of Aram at the oars.

Rachel helped shove the skiff into the water, slipping and planting one hand deep in the mud. She jumped aboard the skiff as it drifted away from the island, dipping her hand in the lukewarm water to wash off the worst of the clinging muck. While wiping the black mud from her fingers, Rachel discovered a leech attached to the back of her hand. She ground her teeth to suppress a shriek.

“I think I picked up a leech,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady as hysteria welled up inside.

“Translucent?” Galloran asked.

Rachel inspected the membranous creature. “Yeah, almost transparent.” Jason stared at it over her shoulder.

“A jelly leech,” Galloran said. “What size?”

“No bigger than my pinkie.”

“Do not seek to detach it,” Galloran warned. “Such action will provoke the injection of a most irritating venom.”

“What do I do?” Rachel felt painful suction and stared as her blood began to flow into the translucent leech, a spreading red stain inside the rubbery body. “It’s sucking!” She bit her lower lip, trying not to scream.

“The creature will detach when sated. Be grateful it is so small.”

Jason rubbed her shoulders. “You’ll be okay,” he encouraged.

Rachel watched in disgust as the creature reddened, bulging with the inflow of blood. Just when she thought the leech looked ready to burst, it detached and fell to the bottom of the skiff.

“It finished,” Jason said.

“Throw it overboard,” Galloran said. “As far as you can. We must keep away from the scent of blood.”

Jason tweezed the leech between thumb and forefinger, stood, and tossed it away with a motion that rocked the skiff. The red leech landed on a little island strewn with messy webs. Rachel rubbed the back of her hand, where a purple bruise was forming.

With Aram at the oars, and the canoes keeping up, they made rapid progress. The trees became spaced farther apart, and the trunks seemed thicker. Off to one side of the boat was an open area with no trees.

“I see some open water,” Aram grunted softly.

“Keep away,” Galloran advised. “We do not want to trifle with the great beasts who inhabit the deep places of the swamp.”

“What are they?” Jason asked quietly.

“Winari,” Galloran said. “Some of the oldest and largest organisms in the world. Theirs are the groaning calls we heard in the night. We would all perish if one caught us. They’re typically dormant during the day, but we’ll avoid the risk.”

As they rowed onward, the swollen masses of fungus became more plentiful on the tree trunks, in dreary shades of yellow and orange. Towering fungal columns rose from muddy islands, stretching toward the leafy canopy above, swaying away from the boats when they came near.

They were rowing through a grove of colossal, widespread trees with no muddy islands in sight when Galloran whispered, “Too quiet.”

“What?” Aram asked.

Galloran lifted a cautionary hand. “Something is amiss.”

Rachel peered around. With dawn approaching, the still waterscape looked almost bright. The daytime noises of the swamp did not rival the nighttime cacophony. But there always seemed to be some hooting in the trees, or buzzing wings, or little clicks, or faint chittering, or distant splashes. With the paddles out of the water, Rachel heard nothing.

To one side, Rachel heard the gentle slosh of disturbed water. Twisting, she saw a translucent snake wriggling up and over the side of the skiff.

“Snake!” she cried.

“Leech!” Jason corrected, drawing his sword.

As Rachel scrunched away from it, Jason’s blade hacked through the membranous body. Part of the leech withdrew into the water, but about two feet of it was left squirming in the bottom of the skiff. Aram scooped an oar underneath it and catapulted the gelatinous segment overboard.

Splashing up from the water, another serpentine jelly leech hung poised in the air before whipping at Jason. Swinging his sword defensively, Jason saw the flat of the blade slap the leech aside before he toppled backward into Rachel, who steadied him. As the leech stretched toward Dorsio, knives flashed in his hands, slicing off the tip of the leech and then two more segments. What remained of the leech reared away, rising even higher out of the water. Only then did Rachel realize that the leech was actually a tentacle.

“Grullions!” Nedwin shouted.

A new tentacle seized the skiff at the stern, making the vessel buck and spin. The sudden motion jolted Rachel down to a seated position. Jason dropped to his knees. Diving, Nedwin slashed the tentacle with a long knife, severing several feet of it. The rest withdrew over the gunwale. Nedwin skewered the squirming section and flipped it into the water.

As the boat rotated slowly, Rachel drew her knife. It felt way too small. Aram, standing at the center of the skiff with his enormous sword in hand, hauled Jason to his feet.

“Foul luck,” Galloran spat, squatting beside Aram.

Looking over at the canoe containing Ferrin and Drake, Rachel saw the displacer standing back-to-back with the seedman, swords sweeping relentlessly to repel a writhing onslaught of tentacles. On the other side of the skiff, one of the grullions lurched onto the canoe with Tark and Chandra, heaving up a fountain of dull water. Its bulbous body was roughly the size and shape of a sea lion, with a pair of flippers, two pairs of tentacles, and a spoon-shape tail.

Tark plunged his saw-toothed knife into the body of the beast as the canoe tilted precariously. Crouching low, Chandra used a dagger to deftly fend off thrashing tentacles while keeping her free hand splayed over the center of the canoe. Her lips moved in a chant, and Rachel realized she was using Edomic to prevent the canoe from overturning. Tark slid his knife along the length of the semitransparent body, opening a deep seam. Tentacles wound around the wide canoe, the tail whipped up and down, Chandra lost her balance, and the craft capsized.

Rachel screamed. Chandra surfaced briefly, only to disappear below the water as if tugged downward. Tark didn't surface at all.

Tentacles seethed from the water at either side of the skiff. Rachel swung her knife wildly, striking nothing. Something slammed the skiff from below, and Aram and Jason fell, their bodies thumping heavily. Nedwin slashed a length of tentacle out of the air. Dorsio intercepted a tentacle reaching for Galloran, slitting it open lengthwise with one knife before severing it crossways with the other.

As Aram arose, a tentacle lashed at him, twining around his muscular sword arm. The heavy blade fell to the bottom of the skiff. Bracing himself, Aram resisted the pull of the elastic tentacle, veins standing out as his bulky muscles clenched and strained. The skiff slid speedily across the water. Blood began to course away from Aram's arm through the transparent tentacle, red mist that soon thickened into a more liquid flow. He bellowed, peeling at the tentacle with his free hand.

"Sorry," Nedwin yelled, his long knife tearing through the sanguineous tentacle, releasing a gruesome spray.

Parted from the grullion, the portion of the tentacle fastened about Aram's arm tensed and vibrated, and the half giant let loose an involuntary roar. He collapsed, his back arched in anguish, his free hand clawing at the crimson parasite.

A pair of tentacles flopped over the side of the skiff near Rachel, and the craft tipped alarmingly. She found herself staring into the face of a grullion, which consisted of a circular mouth wreathed by fluttering flagella. Almost tackling her, Jason brought his sword down in an overhand stroke, cleaving through the head, down to the gaping maw. Sticky juice squirted in their faces. The grullion jerked away and disappeared, and the skiff leveled out.

Rachel heard Galloran chanting. On his knees, head bowed, he was calling heat to the water, specifying one particular area at a time. Borrowing his words, Rachel began summoning heat to the water as well, visualizing roughly a cubic meter of liquid and pouring her will and desperation into the effort. She felt the heat answer her call, then started commanding heat into a different section of water.

Behind her, Aram growled. Recovering his sword, the juicy red tentacle still attached to his arm, the half giant rose to his knees to slice through a squirming forest of rubbery tentacles. He spun and slashed, his long blade lopping off multiple tentacles with each swipe. Nedwin and Jason crouched below him,

using their weapons to hastily pitch the severed tentacles out of the skiff. Dorsio stayed close to Galloran, fending off any tentacles that escaped Aram's blade.

Ferrin and Drake were no longer under attack. Drake was calling heat to the water as well, and Ferrin paddled the canoe closer to the skiff.

The skiff shuddered as a grullion tried to climb aboard, injured tentacles of varying length flailing. From the corner of her eye, Rachel saw Aram split the creature with a violent horizontal slash. Galloran gruffly continued his Edomic chant.

Gasping, Tark emerged from the water, one hand gripping the gunwale of the skiff. As he pulled himself up, something jolted the underside of the craft, and the side of the vessel bashed Tark in the mouth. Jason and Nedwin helped haul the musician over the side. He was still clutching his knife.

There was no sign of Chandra.

Tears in her eyes, Rachel kept calling heat to the water. She scanned the surface in all directions, hoping to see her friend.

The last tentacles receded. Everything became still. A sinister silence enfolded them. Galloran and Rachel continued chanting, and the water around the skiff began to simmer, radiating heat and shedding steam. Drake and Ferrin maneuvered over to reclaim the capsized canoe.

Galloran ceased chanting and started to cough raggedly, perspiration shining on his brow. Drake and Ferrin righted the empty canoe.

"Enough heat?" Rachel asked.

Galloran nodded, still coughing persistently.

"What about Chandra?" Rachel asked, eyes sweeping the surrounding water.

"She's gone," Tark said. "She saved me."

"Gone?"

"They dragged us deep," Tark said, red wetness dripping from his lips. "One had my leg, but I cut free with my knife. It never latched onto my skin. My trousers protected me. They were all around us. Scores of them. Chandra started pushing the water with Edomic. How she spoke underwater, I have no idea. But she created strong currents and used them to shove the creatures away and to help me avoid them. Even as they wrapped her up and started draining her, she sent water to push me upward. The water was hot near the surface. The leech monsters kept away from the heat."

Rachel nodded numbly, her insides twisting as she heard the account. How could Chandra be gone? Just like that? No warning, no good-bye. Rachel resisted acceptance as the simmering water around the skiff quieted.

Hands trembling, Aram snatched up the oars. "We have to go."

In the aftermath of the battle, the entire swamp seemed to be holding its breath. But the silence was shattered when a mighty voice bellowed a deafening blast comparable to a foghorn. Recoiling, they all clapped their hands over their ears.

A powerful jet of water streamed through the trees from off to one side, grazing the skiff and setting it spinning. A direct hit would have flipped them. A second explosive roar followed, after which a second high-pressure stream churned the water nearby, as if sprayed by a giant fire hose. From the direction the water came, through the huge trees, Rachel saw what looked like a hill made of brown, folded blubber. The top of it, presumably the head, was screened by leafy limbs and vines.

"It's vast," Aram murmured.

"A winaro," Nedwin whispered.

"The other canoe is ready," Ferrin announced. He and Drake had towed it alongside the skiff.

"Tark, Nedwin, get in," Galloran croaked.

When the deafening bellow repeated, Rachel noticed that she could feel the skiff vibrating. Tark and Nedwin transferred to the righted canoe, accepting the paddles retrieved by Drake and Ferrin. With water spouting behind them, they paddled away from the mountainous brown creature.

While Aram rowed vigorously, the blood-glutted segment of tentacle finally dropped from his beefy arm, hitting the bottom of the craft with a wet slap. A thick spiral of black bruises mottled his skin from wrist to shoulder. Dorsio used his knives to heave the gruesome tentacle overboard.

The trees stopped looking quite so enormous and widely spaced. Some of the natural chatter of the swamp resumed overhead in the canopy. Rachel noticed a fist-size spider scaling a trunk.

Aram grunted, shivering and sweating, and his body shriveled, deflating into a miniature version of himself. The corkscrew bruise shrank as his arm thinned. Sunrise had finally come, muted by the foliage overhead.

Dorsio took one oar, Jason the other. Rachel moved to the tiller. Aram crawled to the bow. He was still shivering, his face ruddy and damp.

"We were near one of the deep places," Galloran whispered. "The resident winaro did not take kindly to us heating the water. Grullions tend to dwell near winari, living as parasites. A foul turn of events. Chandra was faithful and capable. A survivor. It's a grievous loss."

“I can’t believe she’s ...” Rachel couldn’t finish the thought. They were moving on, and Chandra was not with them. Rachel was left to face the irreparable reality that her friend was gone.

“The Sunken Lands are lethal,” Galloran rasped. “Too many exotic predators. We were fortunate. We could have all perished.”

Rachel stared at Galloran, his broad shoulders hunched, his expression unreadable behind his ragged blindfold and the fabric masking his nose and mouth. How many of his friends had been killed over the years? How many close relatives? Agonizing loss was a major presence in his life. Did it even surprise him anymore? “You never mentioned you spoke Edomic.”

“I have a few hidden talents,” he replied. “You already possess a wider variety of practical skills than I do. I could never grasp how to push objects like Chandra. Your help heating the water was invaluable, Rachel. It saved lives.”

“Aram doesn’t look well,” Jason pointed out.

“I’m fine.” Sweating and trembling, the shrunken half giant was clenching his jaw and rubbing the wide bruise coiled around his arm.

“He was heavily poisoned,” Galloran said. “When the tentacle was severed, it injected him with venom. A lesser man would not be conscious.” Galloran raised his hoarse voice. “Nedwin, Aram needs quimbi bark, and anything else that might relieve his fever and help neutralize the venom.”

Nedwin and Tark paddled their canoe over to the skiff. Nedwin hopped aboard, already rummaging through his pouches as he crouched beside Aram.

“Let Dorsio administer the remedies,” Nedwin said. “I want to look around. I’m afraid we’ve been veering off course.”

“Very well,” Galloran agreed.

Nedwin issued some instructions to Dorsio, left him with ingredients, and climbed back into the canoe. He and Tark stroked over to the trunk of an enormous tree. Leaping from the canoe, Nedwin shinnied up the bare trunk like a monkey, avoiding clumps of fungus where possible, tearing them off when they got in his way, indifferent to the vibrant puffs of spores.

Rachel watched from below, astonished at how swiftly and confidently he found handholds where none seemed to exist. Before long, Nedwin reached the height where the first long limbs extended out from the trunk, and he vanished into the leafy canopy. Faintly, Rachel heard foliage rustle.

As Dorsio tended to Aram, the others stared upward. All was silent for a time, then there came a sudden snapping of limbs, and Nedwin fell into view through the leaves and vines, a gauzy sheet of web flapping behind him like a



cape. Adjusting his body as he plummeted, he hit the water, straight as a spear, a few yards from the skiff.

Tark paddled toward him. Nedwin's head emerged from the murky water, and he boosted himself into the canoe, making the vessel rock. He had lost the fabric masking his face. He shook his head briskly, wiping scum from his wet hair. "Spiders," he spat.

"Spiders?" Tark echoed.

"Up in the branches. Big ones. Hordes of them. Good trap. I was surrounded. I had to jump."

Grabbing a waterskin, Nedwin dumped fresh water in his mouth, swished it around, and spat over the side. "That swamp water tastes worse than we smell."

"Impossible," Jason mumbled.

"I saw the tree," Nedwin said. "The monarch where Corinne lives. We're bearing too far to the north. We need to head that way." He confidently indicated a line diagonal to their current heading. "We were veering toward the Drowned City."

"Another eventual destination," Galloran mused.

"We should separate," Nedwin said. "Let me and Drake take a canoe to Corinne. We'll get there faster. Then we can reunite at the Drowned City. It will require some time for you to take care of business there."

Galloran rubbed his blindfold, his lips pressed tight. "Show Dorsio the heading to the Drowned City."

Nedwin pointed slightly to the left of where the boats currently faced. "That way."

"Can you get us there?" Galloran asked.

Dorsio snapped.

"If that's the proper heading, I can help keep us on course," Ferrin added.

Galloran ground a fist against his palm. "I would prefer to fetch my daughter personally. But the quicker we reach her, the better. We should spend no more time in this swamp than we must. Every minute brings new threats. Find her, Nedwin. Keep her safe. Bring her to me."

"We'll get her," Nedwin vowed.

Tark joined Ferrin in his canoe, and Drake joined Nedwin.

"Bring back lots of those gassy mushrooms," Rachel recommended. "The ones that block your memories. They'll help keep the swamp animals away."

"Will do," Drake replied. "Safe journey."

# THE DROWNED CITY

I see the top of a tower,” Ferrin called back from the canoe. “Correction, a pair of towers.”

“The watchtowers above the main gate of Darvis Kur,” Galloran said. “Guide us close. We’ll pause to confer in their shadow.”

Projecting maybe twenty feet above the water level, the timeworn structures were constructed from stone blocks the size of refrigerators. Trapezoidal battlements crowned the watchtowers. Faces had been carved into the stone, just below the crenellations, the finer details mostly eroded. Moss, slime, fungi, and creeping vines smothered the stone, patiently merging the ancient fortifications with the rest of the swamp.

Rachel surveyed the vicinity uneasily. Only big trees grew here, gloomy giants dripping with foul vegetation, widely spaced, like back where the grullions had attacked. Recalling the grullions helped her realize that the swamp seemed too silent.

“It’s gone quiet again,” Rachel said.

“Very observant,” Galloran congratulated. “Elsewhere in the swamp I would be alarmed. Here it is expected. Not many living things venture near the Drowned City.”

“Lucky us,” Jason said dryly. “We get to be the exceptions.”

“What keeps the animals away?” Rachel asked.

“The most dangerous predator in the Sunken Lands dwells here,” Galloran explained.

“I was wondering when we’d finally see some action,” Jason muttered. “So far this place has been a petting zoo.”

Galloran rubbed his hands together. “I don’t trespass here eagerly. I had hoped to never again cross the borders of Darvis Kur.”

The skiff and the canoe came to a halt beside one of the towers. Galloran stood, moving the fabric away from his mouth and raising his raspy voice as best he could. “The Drowned City is one of the most hazardous destinations in all of

Lyrian. A singular threat lurks here, a powerful being of considerable intelligence. Once, long ago, this being aided me, and I intend to solicit assistance again.”

“What assistance justifies the risk?” Ferrin asked.

“This is where I acquired my supply of orantium globes. As most of you may recall, the mountain where orantium was once mined has been lost for ages, as has the procedure for extracting and storing the volatile mineral. A handful of orantium globes survive as curiosities in the treasuries of the mightiest kingdoms. Maldor probably has some in reserve, but certainly not many. As a lad, I knew that the lorevault at Trensicourt contained three.”

“Most consider orantium so valuable, they would never detonate a globe,” Aram said. His eyes were closed, his face glossy with sweat, but apparently he had been listening along with the others. “The spheres we shattered back at the bridge could have purchased a minor kingdom.”

“I will use any weapon at my disposal to combat the emperor,” Galloran said. “Orantium globes may have become scarce across the rest of Lyrian, but they are no rarity in the Drowned City. The spheres could certainly help us directly: stopping manglers, disrupting cavalry charges, threatening strongholds. But acquiring a significant stockpile of orantium may benefit us even more politically. Mere possession of the explosives will provide an added reason for potential allies to regard us seriously.”

“How did you find this place?” Ferrin asked. “I trade in information. Naturally I have heard of Darvis Kur, the Drowned City. I know it is perilous. But I have heard no rumor of orantium here, or of the powerful entity you mentioned.”

“My suspicions of an orantium stockpile arose through research,” Galloran said. “Material in the lorevault at Trensicourt gave me clues, and I pursued further knowledge at the Repository of Learning and elsewhere. The shadow of the emperor already loomed very large. I was desperate for any possible advantage.”

“Considerable orantium remains?” Ferrin asked.

“Much more than I took,” Galloran said. “I was given a hundred spheres. Hundreds more survive here, maybe thousands.”

“The creature gave them to you?” Rachel asked.

“He was a man once,” Galloran said softly. “A wizard. After incurring the wrath of his master, he was cursed—imprisoned here, his body altered, set on a course to mutate into something like a winaro.”

“You can’t mean Orruck,” Ferrin said.

Galloran nodded, the ghost of a smile on his lips. “I had no idea. I doubt anyone knew that Orruck survived in Darvis Kur. It was a secret Zokar took to his grave. Orruck can no longer speak, but I have long been able to discern the thoughts of those with sufficient mental ability. He meant to slay me on sight, but when I sensed his mind, I called out to him. He hadn’t communicated with anyone for centuries. When he learned that Maldor had risen to power, he aided me with orantium to harm his former rival.”

“Unbelievable,” Ferrin murmured.

“Do you think he’ll help you again?” Rachel asked.

“Possibly,” Galloran said. “If I came to him alone and blind, he might view me as a failure who had squandered his previous gift. But we have two advantages. First, Rachel, I will present you as an adept with the potential to rival Maldor. Your native talent should intrigue and impress Orruck. And second, we carry with us the secret of Orruck’s unmaking.”

“The Word,” Jason realized.

Galloran dipped his chin. “We may not possess the key word designed to undo Maldor. But Maldor informed Jason that he had used a true key word as bait for the false quest, in hopes that an actual key word would better withstand careful scrutiny. He used the word crafted to destroy Orruck. As soon as Jason relayed that secret, I knew we had to pursue the orantium hoard.”

“Maldor could have lied,” Ferrin pointed out.

“I do not believe that Maldor or anyone else suspects that Orruck survives. After years of listening, I have heard no hint of such a rumor. Still, we can’t rule out the possibility that Maldor had less fathomable reasons to lie about the origin of the Word. Nor can we ignore the chance that Orruck has been so thoroughly transformed that the Word will no longer touch him.”

“You may not need to actually use the Word,” Aram said. “The threat might suffice. A bluff with some teeth behind it.”

“Uttering the Word would be a last resort,” Galloran agreed.

“Who will join you?” Ferrin asked.

“Rachel, do you recall the Word?” Galloran asked.

“Yes.”

Galloran adjusted the fabric over his face. “After the influence of Nedwin’s memory enhancer, I recall it as well. I shared it with him, syllable by syllable, while under the spell of the venom.”

“Do we really need to show Rachel’s abilities to Orruck?” Jason asked. “Can’t we just use the Word as leverage?”

“Wizards cannot resist respecting her kind of talent,” Galloran answered. “Not only is her innate Edomic aptitude rare and precious, it reflects the abilities Orruck most admired about himself. Her Edomic skill will add legitimacy to our cause in his eyes. It could help us secure what we need without having to test the efficacy of the Word.”

“I’ll go,” Rachel said.

“I don’t like it,” Jason replied. “Just tell me the syllables. I’ll go hit him with the Word.”

“It might not work,” Rachel countered. “I know you’re just being protective, but it doesn’t make sense here. If the Word fails, you die and we lose the globes. This orantium might make a huge difference for the rebellion. The safest bet is for me and Galloran to go.”

“We’ll bring Dorsio,” Galloran said. “The rest of you should wait here in the skiff. Dorsio has some globes. If we fail, we’ll make sure to detonate some orantium as a signal. If you hear an explosion, get away from here.”

“Not that I lack confidence in the outcome,” Ferrin said, “but would you consider entrusting the piece of my neck to somebody who is not about to confront one of the most deadly beings in the world?”

“Fair enough,” Galloran said. “Dorsio, please lend the fragment to Jason.”

After the chunk of flesh changed hands, Ferrin and Tark came aboard the skiff while Galloran, Dorsio, and Rachel moved to the canoe. She and Dorsio used the paddles to propel the canoe beyond the towers. Galloran raised a hand in farewell. “If we do not return by nightfall, we will not return.”

Rachel glanced back at Jason. He looked worried. She understood how he must feel. He had risked everything to come protect her, and now she was heading into danger, leaving him behind. She tried to concentrate on paddling. Only a few sparse trees projected from the water up ahead. There were plentiful lily pads the size of tabletops, many supporting basket-shaped fungi. For the first time since entering the swamp, branches were not constantly interlaced overhead. Even screened by the hazy atmosphere, it was nice to be under sunlight. “How do we know where to go?” she asked.

“The water is deep in this part of the city,” Galloran said. “We’ll cross the empty parts and watch for a round tower, the top of a graven obelisk, or the head of a tremendous statue.”

“What happened here?” Rachel asked. “Who would build a city in a swamp?”

“These lands were not always sunken,” Galloran said. “Darvis Kur was once the oldest continually inhabited city in all of Lyrian. And arguably the most splendid. Many wizards made their homes here. The great wizards of Darvis Kur belonged to an order called the Custodians of the Mended Chain. They incurred the wrath of a rival order known as the Twenty Magi.

“The Twenty Magi attacked Darvis Kur, and the battle went poorly for the Custodians. They sought help from a wizard hermit known as Pothan the Slow. He seldom came into Darvis Kur, preferring the solitude of the surrounding wilderness. He was described as large and bald and somewhat misshapen, slow of speech and odd of manner. But when the Custodians of the Mended Chain begged him to help save their city, he answered the call.

“Eldrin and Zokar are considered the greatest masters of Edomic. But perhaps no wizard in history could rival Pothan the Slow when it came to sheer power. By the might of his Edomic, Pothan singlehandedly crushed the Twenty Magi. None survived to carry the order forward. The tale tells that they were swallowed by the earth.

“The Custodians were frightened when they discovered just how much power this peculiar wanderer wielded. After his impressive victory, they invited him to become an honorary member of their order, and then tried to poison him.”

“How awful!” Rachel said. “After he saved them.”

“How foolish,” Galloran said. “They succeeded in poisoning him, but not in slaying him. Furious after the betrayal, Pothan sank this entire region, forcing it downward by the devastating might of his Edomic, while raising hills and mountains round about. Surrounding lakes and rivers drained into this realm in an unprecedented flood. The monumental effort cost Pothan his life and created the Sunken Lands. Tens of thousands perished.”

“Wow,” Rachel said. “What a story.”

“Interestingly, the wizard Orruck was a young member of the Custodians of the Mended Chain at the time, one of the few to survive. Centuries later, Zokar chose to make his boyhood home into his nightmare prison.”

Rachel and Dorsio piloted the boat around a stone spire jutting up from the water. A few grimy patches of gold suggested it once was gilded. The slime on the stonework glistened more than the precious metal.

“Is Orruck still a person?”

“He looks nothing like a man. His mutation left him speechless, and his mind has grown clouded. With each passing year, he becomes less human.

When I last saw him, he retained enough self-possession to hold a mental conversation ... and to crave vengeance against a former rival.”

“Do you think he’ll still be human enough to communicate?” Rachel asked.

“He has existed in this state for centuries,” Galloran said. “It has hardly been twenty years since I met him. Barring dreadful luck, Orruck should be in a similar state to when I last encountered him.”

Dorsio pointed diagonally.

Following the line he had indicated, Rachel saw the merlons of an ancient wall protruding from the water, like broken teeth. Behind the partially exposed battlements rose a rounded tower scaled with lichen, empty windows and loopholes offering glimpses of the darkness inside.

Rachel described the tower.

“Bear to the left,” Galloran said. “We are nearing our destination.”

“Why does Orruck hold a grudge against Maldor?” Rachel mused. “It was Zokar who did this to him.”

“The apprentices of Zokar each desired to replace him one day,” Galloran said. “Only one could have survived to do so. Orruck and Maldor would have slighted and betrayed each other whenever possible over the years. Zokar is no more. But Orruck has never forgotten his rivalry with Maldor. Hateful emotions consume him as he patrols the Drowned City, unable to exact revenge on his old adversaries, incapable of wielding the Edomic power he once controlled. As long as he believes he can use us to harm Maldor, we stand a good chance of winning his aid.”

Across a broad span of water, a marble head rose above the surface of the swamp. Part of one nostril had broken away, deep cracks diverged across the chin, and one ear was netted with webs, but the imperfections could not disguise the artistic quality of the regal countenance. Some distance from the enormous head, a stone fist broke the surface of the water, positioned as if it had once gripped a weapon.

“We found the big statue,” Rachel said.

“Which way is it facing?”

“Toward us, more or less.”

“Proceed in the direction opposite the way the figure is facing, and before long you will behold our destination.”

“There are a bunch of trees that way.”

“Good. The swamp is less deep around the shrine.”

Leaving behind the misty rays of the afternoon sun, Rachel and Dorsio guided the boat under the shadow of tall trees bulging with fungal growths. Only the paddles lapping against the murky water disturbed the silence. There was no peace in the quietness, Rachel thought. Only tension.

Carved pillars and stone roofs began to protrude from the water in abundance. Through the trees and man-made obstacles, Rachel glimpsed the elaborate stonework of an immense structure. More details became apparent as the canoe drew nearer. Crowned by six spiraling steeples, the walls of the edifice were ornamented with crumbling stone tracery. Weatherworn stringcourses underscored rows of narrow lancet windows. Leering gargoyles clung to the building like huge stone geckos. The overall impression was that of a partially submerged cathedral.

A yawning hole in one wall allowed water into the structure. The opening was irregular, as if created by brute force.

“It’s gigantic,” Rachel said. “I see a big hole in the wall.”

“Take us inside,” Galloran instructed. “Orruck awaits.”

“How do you know he’ll be here?” Rachel asked, running a hand across the goose bumps on her arm.

“Like most predators in the Sunken Lands, Orruck is nocturnal,” Galloran whispered. “This is his lair. He has excavated extensive tunnels in the bedrock beneath the shrine. During the day, he’ll be here.”

Rachel and Dorsio stroked toward the opening in the wall, a lopsided arch of broken stone wide enough for several canoes to enter at once. Senses alert, Rachel helped paddle through the uneven gap.

The interior of the shrine contained a single vast chamber. Haze-softened sunlight slanted through the western windows, repeating elongated versions of the window shapes on the surface of the foul water. Deteriorating galleries and balconies projected from the walls, sufficient to hold hundreds of onlookers. Craning her neck, Rachel gazed up at the vaulted ceiling, absorbing the intricate details of the cracked, faded frescoes. She wondered how deep the water was in here. Including the underwater floor space, this cavernous room must have held thousands, which made the silent emptiness all the more disquieting.

In a corner of the room obscured by shadow, on a jumbled island of stone slabs, a flicker of movement summoned Rachel’s attention. Turning to study the haphazard pile of rubble, she clumsily thumped her paddle against the side of the canoe.



“See something?” Galloran guessed.

“A movement in the corner of the room.”

“Take us in that direction.”

While Rachel and Dorsio paddled, Galloran stood and cried out in his raspy voice, speaking Edomic. On the island, a bulky form shifted when Galloran commenced speaking. Though the individual words were unfamiliar, Rachel intuited that Galloran was offering a humble greeting and describing peaceful intentions.

As they drew closer, Rachel observed that the creature Galloran was addressing looked something like a huge walrus, minus the tusks. The corpulent beast reclined on a long slab, fat tail in the water. The creature was about twenty feet long, not counting however much of the tail was hidden by the water. Given the size of the lair, she had expected Orruck to be bigger. Still, it was bizarre to think that the bloated, blubbery creature had once been human. Shifting again, the creature emitted a deep, wet sound, like a cross between a sneeze and a dozen bass fiddles.

“I have returned, Great One,” Galloran said, reverting to English.

Rachel heard no reply, but Galloran nodded as if listening.

“I have lost my sight,” he said. “I brought two companions: my bodyguard, Dorsio, and a Beyonder called Rachel, the most promising Edomic adept Lyrian has seen in many years.”

The creature raised itself off the slab, the bulky body supported entirely by the tail as it moved across the water toward the canoe. “Orruck wishes to commune with you,” Galloran said to Rachel. “If any being can awaken your mind to telepathy, he can. See if you can sense his words.”

Rachel closed her eyes, concentrating. Nothing touched her awareness. “Is it like I hear something?” she asked. “Or maybe just feelings?”

“Think of how you force matter to obey Edomic commands,” Galloran suggested. “Try to listen with similar effort.”

She exerted herself, and suddenly words filled her mind, as clearly as if she had heard them. *Most who show real Edomic promise can commune mind to mind.* She knew the words had come from Orruck.

*The girl only awakened to her abilities scant weeks ago,* Galloran replied. *She has come a long way over a short time.*

*A little farther now,* Rachel added mentally.

*Very good,* Orruck responded. *This is your first experience speaking in silence?*

*Yes.*

*You only began speaking Edomic recently?*

*I've only really been practicing for a couple of months.*

*I can feel the validity of your words, Orruck conveyed. I would appreciate a demonstration of your abilities. But first, Galloran, have you held to your end of our bargain?*

Rachel opened her eyes. The deformed body hovered in front of the canoe, still supported by the tail. Rachel counted at least eight murky eyes spaced around the body, along with several breathing slits. She couldn't identify a mouth.

Galloran replied soundlessly. *Alas, I have not yet disposed of Maldor, though I have been a thorn in his palm. The orantium you entrusted to me has been used exclusively to harm his interests. You will recall that when last we met, my hopes resided in a key word I hoped to recover. In the years since, with the aid of another Beyonder, I have learned that the Word was a fraud.*

The creature reared up and bellowed. The entire brown body spread open, not up and down, but side to side, revealing a tremendous mouth fringed with rows of daggerlike teeth. Rachel finally recognized that what she had mistaken for the body was merely the head. What she had taken for the tail was the neck. The impossibly deep roar seemed to proceed from multiple voice boxes bellowing at different pitches. The exhalation carried a humid stench of decay, and the noise reverberated throughout the cavernous chamber.

*Why have you returned? Orruck accused forcefully.*

*Subterfuge has failed. Open warfare is the remaining option. Maldor increases in power every day. I have come to solicit aid in a final attempt to thwart his schemes. I intend to unite the remaining free peoples of Lyrian in a last stand against his tyranny. This strategy represents our final chance to prevent an uncontested reign such as Lyrian has never witnessed. I do not see how we can succeed without more orantium. Mighty Orruck, will you grant me enough orantium to wage war against your enemy?*

Orruck raised his obese head toward the ceiling, horizontal jaws gaping, and let out another bellow, more terrible than the first. Telepathic words hit almost like physical blows. *Why should I trust you to succeed? The original gift should have sufficed! I have no desire to sponsor a losing cause!*

Galloran held up a hand. *My former strategy was flawed. This new plan is sound. Plus, we now have an Edomic adept on our side. Her powers will only grow.*

*If I let her live! Orruck expressed sharply. Show me your ability, Rachel. Turn my rock walls to steel. Take on a new form. Call forth lightning.*

*I only know a few phrases, Rachel apologized. I can summon heat. I can push objects. I can make suggestions to animals.*

*No doubt Maldor trembles with fear, Orruck conveyed scornfully. Protect yourself.* The blubbery head disappeared under the water with a splash.

“Get ready to push,” Galloran murmured.

Before the ripples of the splash reached the island of slabs in the corner of the room, the head surfaced there and gripped a tombstone-size rock in its jaws. Tossing his head, Orruck flung the slab toward the canoe. Rachel shouted in Edomic and willed the projectile sideways. The slab did not change course dramatically, but she altered the trajectory enough that it missed the canoe by several yards.

Orruck hurled another slab. And another. Rachel shoved one down to make it fall a little short, then pushed up on the next so it went long. The fourth slab Orruck seized was the size of a mattress and required real effort for him to fling it. Rachel pushed it sideways with everything she had, and the hefty slab barely missed the canoe, drenching the occupants with the splash.

*Impressive, for one so new to her power, Orruck conceded.*

Galloran patted her on the arm.

*I'm eager to improve, Rachel sent.*

*Very well, Orruck replied. Try a simple transmutation.* Edomic words reached her mind. She understood that they ordered stone to change into glass. Orruck gripped a slab in his jaws no larger than a dinner tray.

Rachel focused on the slab, mustered her will, and demanded that the stone transform. The slab took on a slicker sheen and a smokier color. Whipping his head sideways, Orruck hurled the slab into a wall, where it shattered.

*Excellent, Orruck enthused. You are curious why I cannot use Edomic if I can speak in silence and I still know the proper words.*

Rachel had not deliberately transmitted the question, but the thought had crossed her mind.

*An ingenious physiological modification wrought by Zokar, he shared. My will can't focus in the manner necessary to issue Edomic mandates. If I try, I experience tremendous pain, together with a host of other distracting sensations. I have managed to work around the obstacle enough to preserve my identity, but even the simplest Edomic commands have become impossible to execute. Show me the spell you will use to jolt Maldor.* Once again he shared an Edomic command.

“No,” Galloran said, mentally and verbally. “Lightning requires too much finesse.”

*She has the strength.*

“But not the control,” Galloran said. “Don’t do it, Rachel. If you mean to slay us, Orruck, do it outright. Without a rebellion to halt Maldor, see how fondly he remembers you after his will dominates this continent.”

Orruck glided toward the canoe, neck cutting through the water like a shark fin. *Is that a threat?* The telepathic words had become dangerously silky.

“It’s the reality of the situation,” Galloran said. “The three of us would make a meager meal for one so grand. But we could serve you well in harming a common enemy.”

*Could you help me reach beyond my borders and strike down one who spurned me?* Orruck scoffed. *Is the orantium useless here in my treasure hoard? Will you see it employed to dethrone my archrival? Will you become instruments of my will, bringing me the vengeance I rightfully deserve? I have heard your arguments before, trickster. Do you expect to fool me again?*

Galloran’s raspy voice held steady. “You have little to gain from our demise, but much to gain should you send us abroad. Even if we fail, you strike an unlikely blow against an enemy.”

*I perceive that you are my enemy,* Orruck answered. *I perceive that if I do not comply with your demands, you mean to coerce me. You believe the key word you obtained is destined to destroy me. I can feel that hope behind your words, behind your thoughts. You as well as the girl. Did you come here to threaten me? Do you imagine that a paltry Edomic expression from my days as a groveling apprentice could possibly bother the monstrosity I have become?*

“I imagine that your master knew his trade,” Galloran replied. “This can still end peacefully. Give us orantium. I presume you still have it? We will use it against Maldor.”

*Please,* Rachel added.

The head sank out of sight.

“Where’s he going?” Rachel whispered.

“Fetching globes,” Galloran murmured. “The negotiation is precarious. Stand ready.”

Rachel wrung water from her shirt, her nervous hands anxious to be active. Was Orruck really fetching globes? Or was he preparing to attack?

The head returned and hung over the island of slabs. The great jaws unfolded gently, spilling dozens of tinkling orantium globes onto the island. Several rolled into the water, clinking against the stone. Rachel tensed, half expecting the globes to detonate in his face.

*I have more orantium than you could carry away, Orruck conveyed. This is a humble sample.*

“I understood that you guarded an impressive supply,” Galloran said.

*I set the terms here, Orruck insisted, leaving the island and coming closer to the canoe. How dare you consider threatening me? I should crush you for entertaining the possibility. Here are my conditions. Since I have lost faith in Galloran, Rachel, scorch my ceiling with lightning, and you will depart with my orantium.*

*Galloran and Dorsio, too?* she verified.

*Perhaps. Scorch the ceiling and we will negotiate.* The Edomic command for lightning repeated in her mind.

Rachel looked to Galloran for guidance. She saw his face tense up before he drew his sword and lunged into her, tackling her out of the canoe. Dorsio dove the opposite way. As they hit the water, an enormous claw surged up from beneath the canoe, tossing the craft into the air. Rachel tried to tread water, and Galloran pushed her away with both legs, holding up his gleaming sword so that it impaled the claw as it swiped down and pushed him underwater.

Neck arching, fierce jaws gaping, Orruck snaked forward to swallow Rachel.

“Arimfexendrapuse,” she gasped, nasty water lapping into her mouth.

Orruck’s head rocked back, blubber fluttering wildly, his great mouth clamping shut. All of his eyes closed, and with a brilliant flare of searing light, he was reduced to a cloud of black ash. For an instant the ash held to his shape, a brief afterimage of his existence, and then the sooty particles began to disperse as they drifted downward.

Galloran surfaced beside Rachel, gasping for breath. *Well done,* he transmitted mentally.

She stared in astonished relief at the floating ash. She tried to recall the word she had uttered, but not a syllable remained. *I’m just glad it worked,* she replied. *He was about to eat me. How did you know he was going to attack?*

Dorsio righted the canoe and began to swim it toward Rachel and Galloran.

*The same way he figured out we had the word to unmake him,* Galloran explained. *I sensed his intent just before he moved to swipe the canoe. He was afraid. He hoped to crush us before we could try the Word. Showing us orantium and then challenging you to summon lightning were simply distractions. He did a fine job burying his intentions until the last instant.*

*And you stabbed his claw the same way?*

*I felt it coming.*

“Are you all right?” Rachel asked out loud.

“The blow dislocated my shoulder,” Galloran said. “At least I kept hold of the sword.”

Dorsio helped Galloran into the canoe. Rachel stared at the sword in his hand, the lustrous blade gleaming.

“It’s a beautiful sword,” she said.

“Unequalled craftsmanship,” Galloran agreed. “Dorsio, please force my shoulder back into place. We’ll have to fetch the others. With all the roaring, they may fear we perished. Plus, we’ll need help transporting the orantium. We’ll want to scour the area for all we can find.”

Dorsio placed one hand against Galloran’s back, the other on his upper arm, and reset his shoulder with a measured jerk. Galloran gave a soft grunt.

“There’s a bunch of orantium in view,” Rachel said.

“And more beneath the surface,” Galloran said. “It should help open doors for us.”

# GLOBES AND MUSHROOMS

Doing his best to count one second at a time, Jason had reached two hundred and eighteen before Tark surfaced. Since Jason had reached one hundred and seventy during the previous dive, he was concerned but not yet panicked. Tark had proven that he could hold his breath for a very long time.

“Look what I found,” Tark said, breathing deeply but not desperately, one hand clutching the side of the skiff while the other held up a crystal globe the size of a soccer ball.

“Is that orantium?” Rachel asked.

“Looks like it,” Tark replied.

“It’s huge,” Jason said.

“How huge?” Galloran asked.

“The rock inside is bigger than my fist,” Jason said.

Galloran chuckled with boyish excitement. “A gatecrasher. None are supposed to remain. I have certainly never seen one. They were intended to bombard heavy fortifications. Did you see any more?”

“At least twenty,” Tark replied. “Along with plenty of regular globes, all crowded into a deep chamber.”

“Twenty gatecrashers,” Galloran enthused. “This surpasses my most optimistic expectations.”

“All right,” Ferrin huffed, “I’ll help. But if I catch some horrible disease, I’ll be coughing on all of you.”

“I can get them,” Tark said. “The water isn’t cold. And the globes weigh little underwater. They almost float. I could keep this up for hours.”

Ferrin pulled off his nose and handed it to Jason. “I’ve felt guilty this entire time. This last dive kept you under for too long.”

“It’s a deep chamber,” Tark said, “but I can reach it.”

“It isn’t fair for the one of us who can breathe underwater to relax while you do dangerous work. A find like those gatecrashers pushes me over the edge. I’ll

make sure the deepest recesses are investigated. Jason, don't let the fabric completely block my breathing." He stepped off the skiff.

"I'm not sure how much more we can carry," Jason said. The skiff and the canoe were both already heavily laden with orantium spheres. They had transferred all the globes from the island of stone slabs, and Tark had already salvaged dozens more from below the water.

"Something tells me we could make room for more gatecrashers," Ferrin said, his face unsightly without a nose. He glanced at Tark. "Show me where to go."

The displacer and Tark both vanished below the murky surface, using the last of the luminous kelp to light their way. The glowing seaweed passed out of sight before long.

Jason, Rachel, Dorsio, and Galloran waited together on the skiff. Aram, still small, lay sleeping in the bow.

"Look!" Rachel said.

Jason turned and found Drake and Nedwin rowing through the gap in the wall. They piloted a vessel not quite as large as the skiff, but significantly bigger than the canoe. The young woman who accompanied them had long blond hair. Like the others, her face was covered with fabric, but her expressive green eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Father!" Corinne cried.

A quiet sob shook Galloran before he pulled the fabric from his face and called out, "Corinne?"

"Your daughter lives!" Nedwin exclaimed triumphantly.

Galloran's smile crinkled the exposed portions of his bearded face into happy lines. He pressed a hand to his chest. Drake and Nedwin swiftly rowed nearer.

Corinne leaped lightly to the skiff. She wore brown traveling clothes and notably feminine boots. A sword hung from her trim waist in a long sheath. Jason was surprised to find she was not much shorter than him. As she pulled the fabric from her face to greet her father with a kiss, Jason noticed generous lips, flawless skin, and elegantly sculpted features. She looked to be in her late teens, and abruptly struck him as the most beautiful girl he had ever seen!

Tark and Ferrin surfaced, each holding a pair of large orantium globes.

"Who's this?" Ferrin asked. "How long were we under?"

"They found Corinne," Rachel supplied.

"Why the blindfold?" Corinne asked Galloran. "What happened to your eyes?"

"I lost my sight," he replied.



“Oh no!”

“It was long ago. Tell me what happened to your great-aunt.”

“I don’t recall the specifics,” Corinne said. “I wrote myself a note that said ‘natural causes.’ You’ll have to check my other set of memories for specifics.” She slipped a hand into the satchel that hung from her shoulder and retrieved a round mushroom. When she squeezed gently, spores the color of brown mustard puffed out. Corinne inhaled deliberately.

Even with the fabric over his nose and mouth, Jason added the protection of his hand. He knew the spores would block out all memories except those experienced while breathing the mushroom gas.

“Why can’t I see?” Galloran asked in alarm, pulling the blindfold from his empty eye sockets. Jason flinched at the sight. “What has happened to my voice? Where am I?”

“Galloran!” Corinne exclaimed, taking one of his hands.

“Is that you, Corinne?”

“Yes. I’m away from the tree! You sent two men to free me. Drake and Nedwin. You’ve been blinded since we last met. You look older.”

“So it seems. You’ve grown. You sound like a woman.” Galloran grimaced. “How long has it been?”

“Galloran,” Jason said. “You may want to cover your face. The gas from the mushrooms is messing up your memories.”

“Who speaks?” Galloran challenged, his hand straying to the hilt of his sword.

“I’m a friend,” Jason replied. “We’re traveling together in the swamp to rescue Corinne.”

“Lord Jason!” Corinne greeted warmly, her gaze alighting on him. “Thank you for coming. The others told me the Word did not work.”

“What?” Galloran gasped. “The Word failed?”

“You’ll feel less confused if you cover your face,” Corinne insisted.

Nodding he pulled the fabric into place and backed away. “What happened to my blindfold?” he asked after a moment, pulling it back into place.

“The spores addled you,” Drake said.

“What news of the Pythoness?” Galloran asked.

Corinne quietly recited how her mother had passed away, clutching her chest. Jason thought Corinne seemed a little more soft-spoken in her tree persona. She didn’t seem to realize that Galloran was her father. Inside the tree

she had apparently believed that the Pythoness was her mother and Galloran a friend.

“Where did the new boat come from?” Jason asked.

“Servants of Maldor,” Corinne replied. “Four strangers arrived a few days ago. In my youth, Galloran, you taught me to recognize the armor worn by conscriptors, and three of my visitors were outfitted as you had described. The fourth was a displacer. They entered the tree bearing weapons, but forgot their purpose. I could only assume they had come to slay me. I was a perfect hostess. I fed them. They undressed and went to bed. I poisoned them while they slept.”

“Well done,” Galloran said.

“There were no corpses,” Drake said. “She had dumped them in the swamp. I’m relieved that she believed we were there to help her.”

“I was nervous,” Corinne admitted. “But you bore the proper tokens.”

“Good girl,” Galloran said. “I’m sorry you had to face such a grim predicament, but I’m proud that you did what was necessary. You still have the sword?”

Corinne drew a magnificent blade, so sleek and shiny that it looked too valuable to actually use.

“It’s just like yours,” Rachel said to Galloran.

“Great prongs of Dendalus!” Ferrin gasped. His eyes flicked to Corinne and Rachel. “Pardon the expression. Is that sword what I think it is?”

Galloran unsheathed his weapon. “The companion blade to mine.”

“They’re really torivorian?” Ferrin breathed, his hesitant voice full of wonder.

“Wait,” Jason said. “Torivorian? As in made by lurkers?”

“The dueling weapons of the torivor,” Galloran confirmed.

“The lurker who followed me didn’t carry a sword,” Jason said.

Ferrin snorted. “If your lurker had a sword, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“Maldor can send out lurkers in two ways,” Ferrin explained. “To scout or to duel. He very rarely sends them at all, and much less often to duel, because he can only send each torivor to duel once. After the duel is accomplished, the torivor goes free.”

“The torivor appears bearing a pair of swords,” Galloran said. “Most weapons could not scratch a lurker, but when a torivor comes to duel, it brings a sword that can.”

“It is the only time a torivor will initiate an attack,” Ferrin said. “Otherwise they simply retaliate. But if you have the swords, Galloran ...”

“He bested a torivor,” Nedwin bragged.

“What?” Jason exclaimed. “You killed a lurker in a duel?”

“It required all of my skill at the height of my strength,” Galloran said. “Maldor meant to remove me.”

“I knew that, historically, lurkers had been sent out to dispatch enemies on occasion,” Ferrin said in awe, “but I have never heard a whisper of a torivor losing.”

“There were few witnesses,” Galloran replied.

“When did this happen?” Ferrin asked.

“Years ago, not too long before I was taken. It was the fight of my life.”

“You have long been reputed as the finest swordsman in Lyrian,” Drake said. “But word of this deed never got out. You should be renowned as the greatest swordsman of all time.”

Galloran waved a dismissive hand, sheathing his sword. “I am no longer the same man. Boasts of past deeds will defeat no new enemies. Besides, I may have gotten lucky.”

Ferrin laughed. “Lucky? Against a lurker? Preposterous. Absent the swords, I wouldn’t believe your victory possible. But the weapons are unmistakable.”

“Are you holding a gatecrasher?” Drake asked Ferrin.

“Two, actually,” he replied, displaying them.

“It’s a day for the unbelievable,” Drake said. Glancing around furtively, he lowered his voice. “What of the menace?”

“The menace?” Rachel asked.

“The guardian of the Drowned City,” Drake explained. “My people venture into the Sunken Lands on occasion, but never here. You negotiated with it?”

“They destroyed it,” Jason said.

Drake’s jaw dropped.

“Your menace was the wizard Orruck,” Galloran explained. “The word Jason and Rachel obtained had the power to unmake him.”

“We trusted the message you left back at the watchtowers,” Drake said, “but I did not imagine that you had actually vanquished the menace. To any of my people, that feat will sound even less likely than outdueling a torivor.”

“Congratulate Rachel,” Galloran said. “She uttered the Word just in time to preserve our lives.”

“After Galloran drew Orruck’s attention,” Rachel said modestly. “I had the easy part.”

“Corinne,” Galloran said. “Put aside the mushroom.”

She sheathed her sword and returned the fungus to the satchel. Corinne blinked rapidly and rubbed her forehead.

“Are you back?” Galloran asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Have you spent sufficient time outside of the tree?” Galloran asked.

“A few hours a day,” Corinne replied. “Just as we discussed. Talking with my great-aunt. Reading. Performing exercises with my sword. Waiting.” There was an edge of bitterness to the final word.

“I’m so sorry,” Galloran said. “I didn’t mean to fail. I left you in the safest place I felt I could take you. Mianamon would have been preferable, but there was war in the south at the time. I retrieved you as soon as I was able.”

“I understand,” Corinne said. Her eyes swept over the group. “Thank you all for coming for me.”

“You have been through an ordeal,” Galloran said. “The years in hiding were for your good, but it was nonetheless a dismal prison.”

“It was hardest after Great-Aunt Madeline died. The solitude felt endless. I would write myself notes from inside the tree. I’m ready to start living. My only memories of an actual life are the blurry recollections of childhood. All I have besides that is what happened day after day on a short stretch of muddy island.”

“I’ll do my best to make it up to you,” Galloran promised. “Sadly, for the present, we have led you from solitude into peril. But it could not be avoided. Maldor is moving against the guardians of the syllables. Already some have perished. You would not have thwarted assassination attempts forever.”

“What now?” Drake inquired.

“We load up as much orantium as we can reasonably carry,” Galloran said. “We’ll spend the night here. The day is waning, and the Drowned City is the last place anyone would look for us. It should take some time for the denizens of the swamp to realize Orruck is gone. Corinne’s mushrooms should also help dissuade bothersome visitors. Then, with the first light of dawn, we’ll hurry away from the Sunken Lands.”

Standing on muddy ground at the edge of the swamp, Jason peered northward at an imposing wall of mountains. A progression of rugged plateaus climbed from the perimeter of the Sunken Lands to eventually surge skyward in a magnificent upheaval of stone. Somewhere among those sheer faces and lofty crags, an unseen pass granted access to the western gate of the Seven Vales. In the foreground, a lone hawk wheeled and plunged, illuminated by the setting sun.

Behind and above Jason, a branch snapped. Turning, he looked up to where Nedwin, Ferrin, and Drake advanced along a thick bough, returning from hiding the boats and their cargo of orantium. Thanks to the puffball mushrooms, their trek from the Drowned City to the outskirts of the swamp had been relatively uneventful. Stashing the boats in the swamp had been the last unfinished detail.

Ferrin held a branch that had broken off in his hand. He released it, and the rotten limb fell to the water, sending ripples across the surface scum. Nedwin reached the top of a nearby tree and started down. Drake and Ferrin followed.

Jason, Rachel, Corinne, Tark, and little Aram met them at the bottom of the tree. "Everything go all right?" Jason asked.

"No complications," Drake reported.

"Unless you count Nedwin using the vines to attempt some dangerous swings," Ferrin muttered.

"I only fell twice," Nedwin said. "Water is forgiving."

The group walked over to Dorsio and Galloran, who sat on opposite sides of a modest pile of orantium globes. Most were the regular sort, no larger than baseballs, but three were the larger gatecrashers.

"We're all assembled?" Galloran checked.

"Yes, sire," Nedwin replied.

"Who gets to carry the big ones?" Rachel asked.

Galloran laid a hand on one of the larger globes. "Dorsio will hold them. The Amar Kabal are a reclusive people. Once I was welcome in their land. But times have changed. Should all else fail, I hope to bribe our way in. In these perilous times, I can think of no currency more valuable than orantium."

"They'll admit you without a gift," Drake said firmly. "I don't believe my people hold any living human in higher regard."

"I hope you're right," Galloran responded. "There are influential voices among your people who may not appreciate what my presence could represent in these uncertain times. The boats are hidden?"

"They're well disguised on an obscure little island," Drake said.

"Further guarded by the puffball mushrooms," Ferrin added.

"Then we should start our journey," Galloran said. "The sooner we are behind West Gate, the sooner we can rest. I would be surprised if Maldor did not try to apprehend us between here and there. By now he should have anticipated the Seven Vales as our most likely destination."

"The territory between the Sunken Lands and our gates remains uninhabited by treaty," Drake said. "Imperial troops are only supposed to enter with our

permission.”

“Maldor understands the stakes,” Galloran argued. “By heading us off, he can suppress a possible rebellion. He has reason to expect that the Amar Kabal won’t risk a sortie to enforce the treaty.”

“There was a day when he wouldn’t have chanced it,” Drake murmured darkly.

“Your people have grown even more withdrawn while you’ve been absent,” Galloran said. “They refuse to risk hostilities with Felrook. Their emphasis has been to fortify the Vales for a defensive stand. They display little interest in events beyond their gates.”

Drake frowned. “I won’t be much use in persuading them otherwise. I never expected to return. I may find myself even less welcome than Ferrin. By accepting the invitation to Harthenham, I shamed my people. I expect they will vote to exile me.”

“If so, you will be in good company,” Galloran said. “The finest seedman I know is an exile.”

“I don’t need their approval,” Drake said. “I just wish I were in a better position to advocate your cause.”

“First, we need to get there,” Galloran observed. “No sign of the horses?”

“I’ve been calling,” Rachel said. “I’ll keep trying.”

“I know many routes from here to West Gate,” Drake said. “By foot or by horse, with a little caution we should be able to cross unobserved.”

Aram came clinking over to join the group. He had slipped off to transform as the sun set, and now wore his sword, cloak, and armor.

Galloran turned to him, having heard his approach. “How are you feeling, Aram?”

“Good as new,” he said, rubbing the corkscrew bruise, which had faded slightly, going greenish along the edges. “I won’t slow us down tonight. But without horses, my gear could pose a problem by morning.”

“We carried the sword and mail through the marsh,” Tark pointed out.

“For which I’m grateful,” Aram said. “But speed was not essential there.”

“We’ll manage,” Tark vowed stoutly. “I’ll lug the sword myself.”

“I’ll see to your armor,” Ferrin said. “I don’t want to leave you any excuses for not protecting our hides.”

“It’s appreciated,” Aram said. “I would make my way to the gate at my own pace before I would leave them.”

Galloran arose. "When it comes to hampering our speed while traveling afoot, I will be our biggest liability. We had best not tarry. Drake will lead the way. Ferrin and Nedwin will assist with scouting. I'm afraid there is no rest for the weary. Let's cover as much ground as possible by sunrise."

# WEST GATE

The night was dark and breezy when Drake called for a halt. Holding a finger to his lips, his stance showed concern. Listening in silence, Rachel heard distant hoofbeats. Everyone scattered, reaching for their weapons while searching for some degree of cover.

“All clear,” Nedwin called from an unseen vantage. “They’re ours.”

Rachel spoke softly in Edomic, calling to the animals. Within a minute or two, three horses came trotting up to her, bathed in soft moonlight. She recognized her mare, the huge stallion Aram had ridden, and Mandibar.

“You made it!” Rachel exclaimed, hugging and stroking each of the mounts.

“Do they know where the other horses are?” Jason asked.

“I’m not Dr. Doolittle,” Rachel replied. “I can send out instructions, but we don’t have conversations.”

Hopping down off a tall boulder, Nedwin rejoined the group. “There’s no sign of the other mounts.”

“This is very impressive,” Galloran said. “Rachel obviously issued effective instructions. I did not expect to encounter any of these horses again. I’m afraid they brought some trouble with them.”

“Trouble?” Jason asked.

“I sensed a lurker trailing them,” Galloran said. “Its presence only touched my awareness for a moment. The torivor came near enough to identify us, then immediately fled. Already it has moved beyond the reach of my perceptions.”

“If it ran, there must be soldiers within range,” Drake said.

“Then it’s a race,” Aram said heavily.

“Oh no,” Rachel said. “If I had known—”

“Not your fault,” Galloran interrupted. “If torivors were hunting us, it was only a matter of time before they made contact. Only three of our minds are shielded by charms. The horses will help us increase our pace. This may have worked out for the best.”



“Galloran should ride,” Drake said. “Aram’s horse can carry double. I’ll use Mandibar to scout.”

“If it comes to it,” Aram said, “we can send Galloran, Jason, Corinne, and Rachel ahead on the three horses.”

“I’d prefer we all survived,” Galloran said, mounting Rachel’s mare.

“Rachel, Corinne,” Drake said, swinging astride Mandibar. “You should conserve energy by mounting up as well. You’ll be no burden to Aram’s horse.”

Rachel climbed the strapping steed. The back felt ridiculously broad. Corinne mounted behind her. “It has been a long time,” she murmured to Rachel.

“You rode as a child?” Rachel asked.

“I have fond memories of the activity,” Corinne said. “On this big stallion, I almost feel like a child again.”

“You and me both,” Rachel said.

As they got moving, the pace increased dramatically. Aram kept hold of his horse, and Dorsio led the mare. Rachel felt sorry for Jason and all the men as they jogged along. While Drake scouted on Mandibar, Nedwin led the group, and Ferrin roved nearby.

The moon often vanished behind clouds, making it hard to keep track of the surrounding terrain. Sometimes they progressed across level ground. Other times they weaved among boulders and crags. Occasionally they advanced along the floor of a ravine or followed winding paths up rocky slopes.

As the night wore on, Tark began to cough. What started as an occasional clearing of his throat grew into deep hacking. For much of the night his coughing would subside when they paused for a break. But as sunrise drew near, they stopped beside a wide stream, and he fell to his hands and knees, coughing and gagging until he hawked up a dark-green wad of phlegm. Rachel turned away from the disgusting mass, wishing she hadn’t glimpsed it.

“What does his mouth look like?” Galloran inquired.

Jason stood nearest to him. Tark opened his mouth and flattened his tongue. Jason winced. “His throat looks full of mold. The whole back of his mouth is coated by purplish fuzz.”

Aram peered over Jason’s shoulder. “Quite a garden you have in there.”

Rachel resisted the bile rising in her throat at the descriptions. Her hand involuntarily strayed to her neck.

“Lungrot,” Galloran declared. “Corinne and Rachel should walk for a time. I had hoped to avoid fungal illnesses. Tark will require the horse.”

"I'm fine," the musician protested. "Let the ladies ride."

Rachel had already slid off to the ground. "It'll feel good to stretch my legs," she insisted.

Corinne followed her example. "I was getting awfully cramped in that saddle."

Tark was already hacking miserably again. The fit culminated with a noisy bout of dry heaving.

"Will he be all right?" Jason asked.

"The Amar Kabal have skilled healers for such maladies," Galloran said. "Much will depend on how swiftly we can get him there. Drink, refill your waterskins, and then we should move on."

Jason and Rachel went to a slate shelf where water fell in a transparent curtain. Cool water splashed Rachel's wrists as she disrupted the smooth cascade with her waterskin. The horses drank from the mossy pool below.

"You look tired," Rachel told Jason.

"I wish I could jog and sleep at the same time."

"Can't you?" Ferrin asked, joining them at the little cascade. "I always imagined that you could sleep rolling down a mountainside in a barrel."

"I probably could today," Jason conceded.

"How's it look out there?" Rachel asked. She hadn't seen Ferrin in more than an hour.

"Quiet," Ferrin replied. "I haven't heard Drake in some time. He must have roamed far."

"There goes Nedwin," Aram said, pointing.

Nedwin was scaling a vertical finger of rock to get a view of the broken countryside. He ascended without hesitation, despite an apparent lack of handholds.

"How does he do that?" Corinne asked.

"I'm not sure," Ferrin muttered.

Tark erupted in another fit of coughing. His face turned red, veins stood out in his neck, and he began to vomit. Rachel covered her ears until he finished.

Aram came up to Ferrin. "Do you know which way we're heading? I thought I might run ahead while I have my size."

Rachel glanced at the light gathering on the cloudy horizon. The sun would appear within an hour.

Ferrin turned to face the craggy mountains. They loomed much closer than they had at dusk, but a broken succession of bluffs and ridges still separated the

group from the feet of the real slopes.

“See the ridge with the notch?”

“The one above that really square edge?”

“Exactly. We’re heading around the right side of it, then along a ravine.”

“Understood. See you there.” Aram took off almost at a sprint, ring mail jangling.

“All of us should hurry,” Galloran prompted.

Jason looked up to where Nedwin was descending the spire of rock.

“Nedwin will catch up,” Ferrin said, patting Jason on the arm. “Why don’t you lead Aram’s horse?”

They started moving again, with Ferrin in front and Dorsio and Jason guiding the horses. Corinne and Rachel fell into step beside each other.

“You and Jason both hail from the Beyond?” Corinne asked.

“We didn’t know each other there,” Rachel replied. “We’re from different areas. But yes, we’re Beyonders.”

“You seem close.”

“We’ve been through a lot together.”

“You seem rather young to be involved with my father.”

“We didn’t have a lot of choice in the matter,” Rachel said. “It just worked out this way. We can’t be too much younger than you.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“How long were you in that tree?”

“Since I was four.”

Rachel tried to imagine what it would be like if her only real memories of the world came from age four or younger. “This must all feel really new.”

Corinne gave a brief laugh, emphasizing the understatement. “I’m not used to company. Or danger. Or changes of scenery. I have vivid, distant memories of my childhood—a nursemaid, a playroom full of wonderful toys, a bed with lacy covers, delicious bowls of chilled fruit floating in cream—culminating with my father smuggling me away in the night. He brought me to a tree in the swamp to visit my great-aunt Madeline. The rest of my life happened somewhere beyond the opening to that tree. Every memory begins when I exit the tree and ends when I enter it. I remember some conversations with my father from my younger days. Then he stopped visiting. I remember conversing with my great-aunt. One memory begins with me dragging her lifeless body out of the tree. I didn’t even know how she had died, until I found the note I had written to

myself. Thereafter my only memories pertain to performing exercises with my sword and reading books.”

“I can barely imagine,” Rachel said.

“I dreamed of escaping for years,” Corinne sighed. “Now that I’m free, I can hardly believe it. Part of me had begun to suspect I would grow old and die on that muddy little island. Everything has changed so quickly. I barely know how to feel. This might sound silly, but I somehow expected that when I finally did leave the swamp, it would mean the end of my troubles. Father would take me home to a happier, more meaningful life—the hard-earned reward for my patience. I never expected this.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Rachel said, “I never expected anything like this either.”

They picked their way across a rugged stretch; then the route became smoother and their pace increased. Rachel found herself perspiring and breathing hard. How had the others done this all night? No wonder Jason had looked so tired.

When the sun came up, Rachel paused to stare at the glorious horizon. Beams of sunlight shot through the clouds at dramatic angles, throwing dazzling highlights over the landscape. “Is it always so beautiful?” Corinne asked.

Rachel realized that the vegetation in the swamp would have blocked out sunrises and sunsets. “It’s an extra-good one,” Rachel replied. “But they’re usually pretty nice.”

They hurried onward. After hiking through a long, shallow ravine, they found Aram waiting for them, his ring-mail shirt and heavy cloak bundled with his sword. Ferrin called for a halt, perhaps because he had noticed that Corinne looked ready to faint. Rachel felt bad for her. No matter how much Corinne had practiced with her sword and otherwise tried to stay active, it would be tough to get much cardio when trapped on a tiny island.

While they rested in the shade of an outcrop, drinking from waterskins and catching their breath, Nedwin shouted from a distance that Drake was returning. Within a few minutes, they could hear the horse, and soon Drake rode up on Mandibar.

“I’ve spotted our enemies,” Drake said, urgency in his tone. “At least forty horsemen riding hard, and another large company of riders coming from farther off.”

“How close are they?” Galloran asked gravely.

“We’re much closer to the pass,” Drake said. “I could only spy them from a high lookout miles from here. But in shameless defiance of the treaty, they’re on the main road and riding hard. They’re trying to beat us to West Gate.”

“We have to get there first,” Galloran said.

“That or hide in these foothills,” Drake said. “I know the region well.”

Galloran shook his head. “If they block us from the pass, with a lurker after us and with Maldor adding more soldiers to the hunt, we’ll not stay hidden long.”

Drake scowled thoughtfully. “You really think the Amar Kabal will remain idle if Maldor brings a major force to their doorstep?”

“They may complain,” Galloran said. “But given their recent behavior, I would be shocked if they intervened directly. Maldor has lulled your people into a very cautious state.”

“Mandibar could take two riders if we keep a moderate pace,” Aram said. “So can my horse. Do we send five of us ahead?”

“Galloran, Tark, Rachel, Corinne, and Jason,” Ferrin said. “If they make it to safety, I don’t expect Maldor will risk provoking the Amar Kabal just to harass the rest of us. He’d have to commit too many resources.”

“Could we find the right way to go?” Rachel asked. “Seems like Drake, Nedwin, and Ferrin are the people who can navigate these ridges.”

“Leave me,” Tark panted. “Let Drake take my place. I might be done for anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Jason said. “You’ve been sounding better lately.”

“He lacks the breath to cough,” Galloran said. “I’ve been listening to him wheeze. The lungrot is advancing swiftly.”

Tark climbed down off the horse.

Galloran lowered his eyebrows when Tark’s feet hit the ground. “I didn’t mean for you to dismount. I just meant that your condition is most serious. You could survive, but if you don’t reach the Amar Kabal soon, the illness will take you. Mount up, Tark. Drake, what are the chances of us beating the horsemen to West Gate if we stay together?”

“Despite our huge lead, they’re moving very fast on a good road. It could be close. I rigged three orantium traps along the road. That’s what took me so long. When a hoof hits the wrong spot, an orantium globe will send up an unmistakable signal. The explosion might also confuse and slow them, if they think they’re under attack.”

“There’s a thought,” Ferrin said. “We have plenty of orantium. A pair of us could set up an ambush along the main road and slow them, buy time for the others. If we can find a favorable spot, we might even defeat them.”

Galloran frowned. “If we stay together, can we beat the horsemen to the mouth of the pass?”

“To the mouth?” Drake repeated. “Almost certainly. We’re perhaps three hours from the start of the pass. If we exert ourselves, our pursuers couldn’t get there before us. But even hurrying, it will require more than an hour to make it up the pass to the gate. They could very well ride us down in the meanwhile.”

“Is there a better bottleneck than the pass for an ambush?” Galloran asked.

Drake shook his head. “West Gate was placed in that pass because the way becomes so narrow.”

“Let’s race them,” Galloran said. “If it comes to it, the tight confines of the pass should allow an ambush to wreak havoc on them with orantium.”

Drake folded his arms, his expression brooding. “Once in the pass, there will be no fleeing except through West Gate. If our enemies catch up, or if we’re denied admittance, there will be nowhere to hide.”

“I am an honorary citizen of the Seven Vales by ceremony,” Galloran said. “If the Amar Kabal look on while I’m slaughtered outside their gates, our cause is already beyond hopeless.”

“Corinne’s tired,” Rachel blurted.

“We’ll put her on Mandibar,” Drake said, dismounting. “I have little reason to scout between here and the pass.”

“This is our final sprint,” Galloran said. “We’ll take turns riding as needed to keep the best possible pace. We’re running for more than our lives. The future of Lyrian depends on our success.”

The pace did not feel enough like a sprint to Rachel. Then again, an actual sprint over rough terrain for several miles after so much exertion might not have been realistic. Still, they went faster than ever, and before long the pace seemed plenty quick. Rachel eventually rode again for a while, and Jason mounted up behind Tark for a time. Corinne took another turn jogging so that Aram could ride behind Rachel.

The sun rose higher. Rachel returned to jogging once she felt rested. She had always been in good shape, and roaming the wilderness for weeks on end had her in the best shape of her life. But still she found herself flagging. She tried to draw strength from Nedwin, Drake, Ferrin, and Dorsio, who could apparently press forward forever without respite.

At length they came into view of the road. Drake led them down a gentle slope until they intersected the wide, dirt lane.

"I take it there are no orantium traps ahead of us," Aram said.

"All are behind," Drake assured him. "In fact, it's a favorable sign that the first has not yet exploded."

"Could they have missed it?" Jason asked.

"I rigged each sphere so that a reasonably broad area of road would trigger the detonation. One rider might miss it, but forty will surely spring each of the traps."

"On level ground I can walk as fast as any of you," Galloran said. "Let others take my mount."

Tark coughed weakly—a hitching, reedy wheeze, as if his airway were mostly plugged. He rode with his head bowed and his eyes closed. Rachel, Corinne, and Aram rode as well.

The pass came into view ahead, a deep gorge that wound up into the imposing mountains. On the level road, they made their best time yet. Rachel hoped that after so many miles at high speeds, the horses chasing them would become tired.

They were not yet to the mouth of the pass when a distant boom reached their ears. Mandibar whickered in response.

"The first trap," Drake said. "We have a chance, but it will be close. Ideally, we should quicken our pace, but the grade up the pass will make that easier said than done."

"Onward," urged Galloran, increasing the speed of his shuffling jog.

They advanced into the shadow of the gorge, steep walls of rock rising to impressive heights on either side. The road steepened. Everyone on foot panted harder.

Suddenly Galloran stopped and held up a hand. The group halted. He craned his neck, tilting his head from side to side. "I sense a presence."

"There," Drake said, a finger stabbing upward.

Rachel followed the line on his arm up to a distant silhouette atop one wall of the gorge. Just as her eyes found the figure, it jumped, arms and legs spread wide, and fell hundreds of feet as if fully committed to a suicidal belly flop. An instant before impact, the hurtling lurker changed position, landing in a crouch on the road. Although it seemed to land with tremendous speed, Rachel heard no sound.

The dark, featureless figure stood upright, spreading its arms. Rachel dimly sensed a command directed at their mounts.

In unison, the horses reared. Rachel and Corinne slid backward off Aram's big stallion. Rachel landed hard. Croaking for breath, she lunged for the reins of the horse as it bolted away. She fell short, sprawled in the dirt, one hand inches from getting crushed by a rear hoof.

Raising her head, Rachel saw Aram clinging to the side of Mandibar's saddle. Tearing free a bundle of gear, the little man skidded into the dirt, bouncing and rolling, embracing the rescued equipment. Tark had fallen with a foot snagged in a stirrup, and was dragged dozens of yards down the road, spewing a dusty contrail before wrenching his leg free.

All three riderless horses galloped away down the pass.

Rachel called out to the horses in Edomic, asking them to return. It was tricky to tell if they even heard her.

"Whatever happens," Galloran commanded in his perpetually hoarse voice, "take no aggressive action involving the lurker." Drawing his beautiful sword, he strode directly toward the dark figure blocking the road, as if he could see it.

"Servant of evil," Galloran announced. "Stand your ground and meet your ruin, for I have dispatched others of your kind with this blade."

"No," Jason whispered.

Sword held ready, Galloran advanced without hesitation. Rachel held her breath. When the lurker was almost within reach, the creature crouched and sprang up against the wall of the gorge, then with another tremendous leap, soared over Galloran to land in a sprint. A dark blur, the figure dashed down the road faster than the horses had run.

Rachel gaped at the inhuman speed of the lurker. Turning, she saw Jason regarding Galloran with astonishment.

"How did you do that?" Jason asked.

"The torivor knew I spoke the truth," Galloran said, sheathing his sword. "Unarmed, it would have fallen."

"But you're blind," Jason said.

"I could feel the mind of the lurker," Galloran replied. "I knew where it stood. It knew that I knew. Also, it had nothing more to accomplish here. It succeeded in slowing us, and now hastens to urge our pursuers to increase their pace. The complexion of our race has taken an awful turn."

"Tark is injured," Ferrin called, crouching beside the short musician in the road. He had not moved since twisting free of the stirrup.



"Is he conscious?" Galloran asked.

"No."

Galloran sighed. "Rachel, any chance of calling the horses back?"

"I'm trying," she replied.

"I can try to fetch one," Nedwin offered.

Galloran shook his head. "It will cost too much time. Who will carry Tark?"

"Where is my size when I need it?" Aram lamented. His clothes were torn and filthy from his fall, but he seemed unhurt beyond cuts and scrapes.

"I'll carry him," Drake said, trotting over to him. Ferrin helped Drake situate Tark over his shoulder. Dust billowed from Tark's cloak. His hair was caked with dirt and blood.

"Is that your gear?" Ferrin asked Aram.

"Leave me with it. Give me ten spheres of orantium, and I'll buy you some time."

"Give me the sword," Ferrin said.

"I'll carry the armored shirt," Nedwin offered.

Eyes closed, Rachel kept calling the horses. She could envision them clearly. Why wouldn't they come? Had the lurker struck some primal chord of panic within them? Or maybe the torivor was blocking their return?

In the distance, she heard another explosion, closer than before.

"Second trap," Drake said. "They're gaining too fast."

"Why don't they get off the road?" Jason asked. "You know, run parallel. How many mines does it take?"

"Most of the terrain off the road is rugged," Drake said. "If they leave the road, they won't catch us."

"Are we ready to proceed?" Galloran asked.

Nedwin draped the ring mail across his shoulders and rubbed his chest absently. "Ready."

As they continued up the pass, Rachel kept calling the horses. She repeatedly instructed them to be calm, combined with the request to come to her. The incline of the road soon became torturous to Rachel's fatigued muscles. She and her companions were basted in sweat. The way twisted and turned, preventing them from seeing far ahead or behind. The weary group shambled forward, failing to go much faster than a brisk walk. Corinne seemed on the brink of collapse. Rachel plodded forward in an exhausted haze, cresting a rise only to find the pass winding onward and upward with no end in sight.

Hoofs pounded behind them. Rachel felt a brief jolt of panic, but the emotion turned to relief when her mare and Mandibar loped into view. Drake hastily draped Tark over Mandibar's saddle and had Corinne mount up to stabilize him. Galloran climbed onto the mare, and they hurriedly packed Aram's gear onto Mandibar.

With the help of the horses, they managed to pick up the pace. The effects of sleeplessness and relentless exertion were impacting Rachel. Her eyes itched, her legs ached, and her throat felt raw. Jason kept his head down and wore a constant grimace.

When the third explosion rumbled behind them, Rachel cringed. It sounded nearer than the previous blasts.

"That one wasn't far behind where we joined the road," Drake said. "They've ridden hard to close this quickly. The horses may tire."

"No," Galloran warned. "The lurker will be behind them, driving them forward. Only death will slow those steeds."

"Then they may beat us to the gate," Drake said.

"I can climb the wall of the gorge," Nedwin said. "I see a position where orantium could provoke a rockslide. And I'll be out of their reach. I'll need globes."

"Include a gatecrasher with his supply," Galloran said.

Dorsio rapidly prepared a knapsack of orantium spheres, including one of the larger globes.

"There will be negotiations at the gate to gain admittance," Drake said. "Galloran should ride ahead."

"Tark, Rachel, and Corinne will join me," Galloran decided. "The rest of you make sure you have orantium ready."

Nedwin was already heading up the side of the gorge, climbing deftly. Dorsio checked that everyone had some orantium globes.

"Sit in front of me so you can guide the horse," Galloran told Rachel.

"We're not leaving them to make a last stand?" Rachel checked as she mounted.

"We're trying to get everyone to safety," Galloran said. "But they need to be prepared for the worst contingencies."

The horses sped up. Rachel encouraged them with Edomic. Drake had ridden Mandibar hard earlier, and even though the mare had not traveled quickly, she had covered rough terrain nonstop all night and for part of a day. And who knew how hard the horses had run to make it around the Sunken Lands? Even

so, both horses managed a loping gait that swiftly took Rachel beyond view of her friends.

The way steepened, twisting ever higher into the mountains. Rachel tried not to think of Jason and the others having to cover all of the same ground on foot with a cavalry in pursuit.

They rounded a bend, and an enormous fortification finally came into view at the top of the pass, spanning the gorge like a dam. A raised drawbridge made the imposing wall even less inviting.

As they rode forward, further details became apparent. Soldiers could be seen among the battlements atop the gate. A pair of maroon banners, emblazoned with golden peaks, hung from the top of the massive granite wall. Scores of holes lined the sides of the pass above the gate. Rachel glimpsed faces peering from some of the holes and concluded that the apertures allowed defenders to fire arrows from tunnels in the mountainside.

Rachel slowed her mare as they reached the base of the wall. Corinne drew up beside her. It had to be more than fifty feet high, and in front of the base ran a deep trench with spikes bristling along the bottom.

“Are we near enough to address the gate wardens?” Galloran asked.

“If you shout,” Rachel guessed.

Galloran dismounted and raised his voice. “Hail, children of Eldrin! Could one of you fetch your captain?”

“I am Halak, High Captain of West Gate,” a tall figure answered from above. “We have not been ignorant of your approach, traveler. Why have you brought bloodshed to our doorstep when we make it no secret that this gate is sealed to outsiders?”

“Will it not open for an honorary kinsman?”

“Who am I addressing?”

“I am Galloran, heir to the throne of Trensicourt and sworn ally of the Amar Kabal.”

The captain paused. “If you speak truth, what errand brings you to the borders of our land unannounced?”

“If I speak truth?” Galloran repeated incredulously. He tore the rag from his eyes, revealing his scarred sockets. “I once frequented these vales. The years have not been generous, and I now wear a beard, but does no man upon the wall recognize my face?”

“My apologies,” Halak answered. “Why do you seek entry into our land?”

“By ceremony, I am a friend of the Amar Kabal. I wish to invoke my right to bring a proposal before the Conclave.”

“So you are not seeking passage through this gate to evade imperial pursuit?”

“The riders who pursue us are a consequence of my visit, not the motivation. We set out from Fortaim many days ago with this destination in mind.”

“Regardless of your intent, given the circumstances, admitting you could jeopardize our tenuous relations with Felrook.”

Galloran replaced his blindfold. “Dozens of imperial soldiers have invaded the neutral territory between your gate and the Sunken Lands to hunt my companions and me. The emperor is in open violation of your treaty already. His horsemen are chasing us up the gorge. Given the opportunity, they will cut us down outside your very gates.”

“We’re aware of their movements,” Halak replied carefully.

“We come bearing a tribute of more than fifty orantium spheres, including two of the large globes known as gatecrashers. I imagine you would not relish the idea of these explosives falling into enemy hands.”

“A bribe and a threat in the same breath. Which should I heed?”

“Neither. I am conversant with your laws. Until my friendship status is revoked, it remains my right to pass through this gate at will. My status can only be revoked by a majority decision of the Conclave, at a hearing where I am afforded the opportunity to speak in my defense.”

“I cannot refute your claim. But your privileged status does not extend to your comrades.”

“I can vouch for each of my nine companions. When I last visited your realm, my word would have been more than sufficient to secure a welcome. I recognize that times are changing. I do not visit to abuse my privileges. I do not seek prolonged sanctuary for myself or my companions. Grant us admittance for a week, so I can bring vital information before your Conclave. Complain to Felrook that I invoked my legal rights, according to your laws. We will voluntarily depart after I conduct my affairs with your elders. If your leaders so choose, you can turn us over to the minions of the emperor at that time. No harm will befall your delicate treaty.”

“Who are your companions? I only count three.”

“This is Tark, former musician with the Giddy Nine, who requires urgent treatment for lungrot and who recently returned the seed of Jasher to the guards at East Gate. Forgive his unconsciousness. He rides with my daughter, Corinne. And we’re also joined by a Beyonder named Rachel, a promising Edomic adept.”

“And the others?”

“Only two of our horses remain with us. The rest of my comrades straggle behind us on foot. My bodyguard, Dorsio, is not present; nor is my assistant, Nedwin, formerly of the House of Geer; nor is Ferrin, my chief scout. We also travel with Aram, a smuggler from Ithilum; Lord Jason of Caberton, a Beyonder who has joined the fight against Maldor; and Drake of the Amar Kabal.”

“Drake, the son of Hessit?” Halak exclaimed. “He accepted an invitation to Harthenham!”

“And recently fought his way free,” Galloran added.

“Very well,” Halak responded. “You are a man of no small reputation, Galloran. I will admit you and your companions. You will have your hearing before the Conclave. Be forewarned: It is possible that you are merely stalling your capture rather than evading it.”

“We understand.”

Halak gave a signal, and the iron-plated drawbridge clattered open, spanning the trench at the base of the wall. Galloran climbed back onto the horse with Rachel. As the group crossed the bridge, Rachel glanced down into the trench at the thicket of spikes.

The wall was quite thick, with a pair of raised portcullises, and a huge gate standing open at the far side. In the paved yard beyond, many soldiers stood at attention, mostly clad in leather armor. A group of at least twenty sat astride horses. The men were mainly armed with swords and spears. Several women held longbows. They all had a portion of their hair rolled up at the nape of their necks. Jasher had once explained that the style helped conceal and protect their seeds.

A succession of blasts came thundering up from lower in the gorge. Rachel looked back in distress. Rumbling echoes muddled the cannonade. After a few trailing blasts, the explosive clamor ended.

Halak quickly descended a stone staircase, one hand resting on the hilt of a sword at his waist. A tall man with dramatic eyebrows, he strode over to the horses as Galloran dismounted.

“Trouble follows you up the pass,” Halak said.

Galloran faced him, speaking calmly. “Captain Halak, would you send riders to escort my friends who travel afoot?”

“We’ve monitored the progress of your pursuers,” Halak replied. “If we sally forth, it could spawn a major confrontation.”

“If you hesitate, imperial forces will murder friendly visitors in the pass outside of your gates. I understand that relations with Felrook are strained, but we both know that Maldor is no respecter of weakness. You will find little resistance. Not more than twenty foemen would have survived the ambush you just heard deployed.”

Halak gave a signal, then helped lead the two mounts bearing Rachel, Corinne, and Tark away from the gate. Twenty riders galloped out of the gate and across the drawbridge.

Halak drew near to Galloran, speaking for his ears only. Rachel made an effort to overhear. “We kept a very close watch of your movements across the neutral territory and up the pass. I have sentries along the rim of the gorge. We have an efficient system of signaling that has kept me informed minute by minute. I would have sent help earlier had intervention become necessary. Our riders will reach your friends before the enemy, all save the lone man who scaled the wall of the gorge. His chief threat at present is his precarious climb.”

“You have my deepest gratitude,” Galloran said. “It took planning to have those riders standing ready.”

“My discourteous welcome on the wall was a shameful political necessity. There are isolationist proponents in our midst who must be appeased. By appealing to the fearful, they wield enough clout to create serious trouble.”

“I appreciate your explanation,” Galloran replied. “Believe me that I grasp the all-too-frequent need for careful political maneuvering.”

“Many eyes observed how I greeted you. I am grateful you withstood my disrespectful reception and offered such convincing reasons for me to grant admittance to you and your comrades. Your persuasiveness freed me to perform my duty correctly.”

Halak strode over to Tark, parting the musician’s lips with his thumbs. “Your comrade is sorely afflicted.”

“The illness has evolved quickly, aggravated by strenuous travel,” Galloran said.

“Trust him to our care.” Halak helped Corinne down, then handed Mandibar’s reins to a woman, who led the horse away. A second woman kept a steadying hand on Tark. “Can I make the rest of you more comfortable?”

“The young women, perhaps,” Galloran said. “I would rather wait until the others are safe.”

“I’ll wait too,” Rachel put in.

“Me too,” Corinne agreed.

“Very well,” Halak said. “I’ll be back shortly.”

Rachel listened intently. The next round of explosions would come when the enemy horsemen engaged Jason and the others. She waited in agony.

*The longer we hear nothing, the more likely we’ll hear nothing,* Galloran conveyed mentally.

*Did you just read my thoughts?* Rachel asked.

*Once you learned to speak in silence, your mind became much more open to mine,* Galloran explained.

*You can’t just read anyone’s thought?*

*Only other beings who can speak in silence, like wizards or torivors. For example, I can’t hear Nedwin’s thoughts, nor can he hear mine, no matter how intensely I try to transmit them.*

Rachel considered the idea. *But you read my mind even though I wasn’t trying to speak to you.*

*An ability that sets me apart from many. Of those who can hear your thoughts, most will only recognize those impressions you deliberately send.*

Rachel glanced at Corinne. *We’re sort of leaving your daughter out of the conversation.*

*I can hear you as well,* Corinne conveyed.

Yes, Galloran shared. *Corinne and I have held mental conversations ever since exiting the swamp together. Had you exerted yourself, you could have listened in.*

*I frequently spoke this way with Great-Aunt Madeline,* Corinne explained. *She told me this type of gift is often hereditary.*

*Do you speak Edomic?* Rachel asked.

*Not with much power,* Corinne replied. *On a good day, with a lot of effort, I can ignite a small fire. I can’t do much else. But speaking in silence comes naturally.*

Halak returned. “I’ve had news. That was a good man you sent up the mountainside. He created enough of a rockslide to block the pass. The imperial soldiers took heavy losses. The horses couldn’t cross the rubble, so those who survived tried to proceed on foot, but retreated when challenged by our horsemen.”

“How is the man who scaled the wall?” Galloran asked.

“Most of our riders are waiting for him.”

“Everyone is all right?” Rachel asked.

“Your comrades are on their way,” Halak replied warmly.

# THE SEVEN VALES

The soldiers at West Gate resided in tunnels chiseled into the mountainsides. Captain Halak made arrangements for a meal to be served in his personal quarters. The room where Halak escorted Jason and the others held a long, low table surrounded by twelve mats. An elegant, square storage cabinet stood against one wall. Two round windows and a few oil lamps provided light.

The polished table supported woven baskets of bread, cheese, nuts, fruit, and vegetables. Wooden bowls that held soups and sweet confections sat alongside pitchers of juice, milk, and water. After inviting his guests to help themselves, Halak departed.

“Not much furniture,” Jason observed.

“The Amar Kabal value simplicity,” Galloran said, “which is a powerful endorsement for the principle, considering they have spent many lifetimes determining how best to live.”

“I heard they have vast caves full of treasure,” Aram said.

“Any chance others are listening?” Ferrin asked.

“Halak assured me a private room,” Galloran said. “He understands our need to confer.”

Drake opened the cabinet door, snooping around. “That’s one explanation for why he left so swiftly. He also may not wish to be accused of consulting with us. I know Halak. Not a bad man, but very careful about his interests.”

“He opened the gate,” Galloran pointed out.

“As I said,” Drake said, closing the cabinet door, “not a bad man.”

“Is their treasure a forbidden subject?” Aram asked.

“Unlike most tales of hidden wealth, that one is true,” Galloran said. “The Amar Kabal keep enormous stores of food and valuables in secret caverns. They are a prudent people. The Seven Vales were chosen as a homeland, for the highly defensible geography. And fallback strongholds await the seedfolk deep in the mountains.”



“Too many of my people obsess about preserving their long lives,” Drake griped. “With the threat of Maldor looming, certain shortsighted leaders have preyed on our cautious natures to our detriment. If we continue to avoid confronting the emperor, we may be the last kingdom to fall, but fall we will, and Maldor will burn our seeds.”

Galloran sat cross-legged on a mat. “If your people will acknowledge that reality, we might obtain the help we need.”

“Good luck,” Drake said. “The fruitless debate influenced my decision to stay away.”

Jason sat between Rachel and Corinne. After days of grueling travel, the abundance of fresh food nearly brought tears to his eyes. He grabbed a thick slice of dark bread and took a bite. Hearty and dense, the bread was saturated with honey.

“This bread is amazing,” Jason said.

“You will find no finer bread or vegetables anywhere,” Galloran said.

Jason was very conscious of Corinne eating beside him. Girls that beautiful dated quarterbacks and rock stars. They weren’t supposed to inhabit the real world. Despite the eagerness of his hunger, he tried to eat with his best manners.

Aram held up a long, knobby vegetable. Having bitten off the end, he scowled with displeasure. “No meat?”

“Most of my people avoid meat,” Drake said. “Some will occasionally serve fish or poultry. I’m fond of a thick steak or a salty ham, but that places me in the minority.”

“The Amar Kabal want their bodies lithe and strong,” Galloran explained. “They also generally eschew addictive substances, including strong drink.”

Aram shook his head, stirring his soup. “I can’t fathom the point of living a hundred lifetimes without beef, venison, and mutton.”

“I hear you,” Ferrin said. “Then again, these cucumbers aren’t bad.”

Jason finished munching some nuts. “I heard you discussed a conclave?”

“The Amar Kabal value experience,” Galloran said. “They are ruled by a gerontocracy. Their governing body, the Conclave, consists of the eldest living member of the Amar Kabal, together with the next two eldest males and the next two eldest females willing to undertake the responsibility.”

“Those five leaders will decide whether the Amar Kabal will help us?” Aram checked.

“They get the final word,” Drake confirmed. “But they’re surrounded by counselors, and any member of the Amar Kabal is free to speak out on any topic.

Our leaders listen to the people.”

“We need the Amar Kabal,” Galloran said. “Their women are the truest archers in Lyrian. Their men are the most proven warriors. Their commanders possess centuries of experience. And perhaps most important, if they join us, it will become much easier to recruit other nations.”

“But first they must stop clinging to their neutral status,” Corinne said.

“This is our problem,” Galloran agreed. “The inert tend to remain inert. Passivity has been the standard for so long, it will be hard to rile the seedmen to action. When last I counseled with Pallas, eldest of the Amar Kabal, he helped me arrive at my decision to try to destroy Maldor by discovering the Key Word. The hope of a simple solution was too tempting to resist. Now the situation has changed. Our only realistic option is a coordinated rebellion against the emperor. I must awaken the Amar Kabal to the reality that their neutral status will only survive as long as it works to Maldor’s advantage.”

“It will be an uphill battle,” Drake said. “Plenty among us have tried to raise the alarm.”

“I’m still formulating my strategies,” Galloran said. “But I’m in a unique position to promise outside help and to bring a fresh perspective to the discussion. And I can proclaim the Word a fraud, thereby erasing an excuse for waiting.”

Drake swallowed a hunk of bread. “You realize that if you fail, there are many among our leadership who would gladly curry favor with Felrook by handing you over.”

“I’m aware,” Galloran said.

“In which case, we’ll let Nedwin shower them with orantium,” Ferrin said glibly.

“Nedwin really saved the day,” Jason said.

The redhead looked uncomfortable with the praise. He rubbed his knuckles against his chest. “I got fortunate. I gambled by using the gatecrasher to start the rockslide. It blasted away more of the cliff than I could have expected. I threw the globe far, and it fell a fair distance before detonating, but I still barely hung on as the mountain quaked. I may have wasted some of the subsequent globes I threw. A dust cloud hid the bottom of the gorge.”

“You gave the guards here a new chore,” Drake said. “It will take some time to clear that much rubble. But I’m sure they’ll find a use for the stone. We tend to be resourceful that way.”

Jason sampled a dark-green fruit topped by a tuft of silky white strands. The tiny fruit tasted sweeter than pure sugar, making him cough in surprise. “What is this?”

Several around the table chuckled. Ferrin grinned. “Qualines are only meant for use as a sweetener.”

Jason licked at a bit of the fruit lodged between his teeth. The pulpy fragment continued to secrete sweetness until it came loose, and he swallowed it.

“You used to come here often?” Aram asked Galloran.

“I have visited this realm three times before,” Galloran said. “Once I remained for a couple of months. My other stays were shorter.”

“Are the Seven Vales big?” Rachel wondered.

“Bigger than an outsider would suppose,” Drake said. “The seven main valleys include Broadvale, Crookvale, Longvale, Midvale, Roundvale, Deepvale, and Farvale. There are a score of smaller offshoots from the main valleys, along with several other disconnected vales, higher in the mountains.”

Galloran dabbed at his lips with a napkin. “Tomorrow we will travel to Longvale, where the Conclave convenes. The journey will consume most of the day.”

“And no meat in sight,” Aram grumbled. “What’s wrong with these people? Those seeds have corrupted their good sense.”

“Didn’t you hear what Ferrin said about the delicious cucumbers?” Jason teased.

“I kept my legs moving today with the thought of a hearty roast at the end of the road,” Aram sulked.

“I cannot believe you’re going on like this in front of the cucumbers,” Corinne chided, taking a deliberate bite of the vegetable and sharing a glance with Jason.

“Corinne, was that a joke?” Ferrin said in mock astonishment. “Welcome to the conversation!”

She flushed shyly.

“If we can expect another journey tomorrow, we should secure horses,” Ferrin went on. “And if the sun will be shining, perhaps a goat for Aram.”

“Keep it up,” Aram dared him through clenched teeth.

“Is a goat too large and unruly?” Ferrin asked. “Maybe we could saddle a raccoon.”

“Odd how these taunts tend to fade after sundown,” Aram growled, taking a large bite of bread.

“But a new day always dawns,” Ferrin replied. “And we can all use some entertainment.”

Aram glowered. “Then perhaps tonight I should pull you apart and let the others puzzle you back together.”

“That’s the spirit!” Ferrin applauded. “Taunt back! I get the sense you’ve seldom had to deal with ridicule.”

Aram appeared to be resisting a pleased little smile.

“Halak offered us accommodations for the night,” Galloran said. “I suggest we claim some well-earned rest.”

“Should I check on Tark?” Jason asked.

“He’s in good hands,” Galloran said. “And almost certainly unconscious. We’ll pay him a visit in the morning.”

Everyone stood. Jason stretched. Nedwin staggered, steadied himself, lowered his brow, rubbed his chest, then tipped forward onto the table. He landed without making any effort to stop his fall, his body crushing woven baskets, his face upsetting a wooden bowl of diced fruit slathered with cream.

“What happened?” Galloran asked.

“Nedwin fainted,” Rachel said.

Ferrin and Drake were already rolling him off the table and onto the floor.

“Blast!” Galloran exclaimed. “Check his mouth.”

Drake was already wiping cream from Nedwin’s slack face and pulling his jaws apart. “Advanced lungrot,” Drake reported, eyes squinting in disgust. “Worse than Tark.”

“I should have known,” Galloran muttered. “Somebody fetch Halak. We’ll need to get Nedwin immediate treatment. Is he breathing?”

“Barely,” Drake said.

“Watch him,” Galloran said as Corinne and Aram hurried from the room. “He can’t feel pain or many types of discomfort. He probably knew something was wrong, but failed to appreciate the severity. Or maybe he was just being stubborn.”

“How could he not feel it?” Drake said. “The disease has almost taken him.”

“He was a prisoner at Felrook for years,” Jason said. “They experimented on him with pain enhancers. It left him permanently numbed.”

A pair of seedmen rushed into the room. One quickly checked Nedwin’s mouth and grimaced in revulsion. They picked him up, one supporting him

under the shoulders, one by the legs.

“We’ll rush him to the sicktent prepared for your comrade,” one of the seedmen assured them.

As they exited the room with Nedwin, Corinne entered. “Aram is still looking for Halak. The guards we found seemed helpful.”

“You did well,” Galloran said. “Let’s hope the treatment isn’t too late.”

After breakfasting on hot cereal the following morning, Jason accompanied Galloran to visit Tark and Nedwin. An unsociable man in leather armor directed them toward the gate. Unrushed, Jason got a better look at the people. They were mostly tall and serious, wearing light armor, if any. There was a tendency toward dark hair and light eyes. Some wore the unrolled portion of their hair in braids, while others let it hang free.

A few people nodded at Jason. Most went about their business: unloading provisions from a wagon, adjusting the mechanisms of a huge catapult, standing watch on the wall or on the crenellated balconies projecting from the mountainside. No one approached Jason or Galloran to make conversation.

“Why didn’t we ever hear Nedwin coughing?” Jason wondered.

“I doubt he ever felt the urge,” Galloran said. “Felrook left his senses damaged. He must have noticed a shortness of breath, but Nedwin is the sort to silently push through such inconveniences.”

Not far from the gate, they found a small, domed tent of stitched animal hides. A flap on the tent lifted as a skinny middle-aged woman emerged, along with a billow of fumes.

“Is Tark inside?” Jason asked.

She blinked repeatedly, wringing tears from her red-rimmed eyes. “Nedwin as well. Both should recover.” She spoke with a heavy accent, slurring her words. “Nedwin’s fate remained questionable until after the moon set. Tark should be able to quit the treatment by tonight, Nedwin by the next day. The wounds to Tark’s head were superficial. For both men, the lungrot is in full reversal.”

“May we go inside?” Galloran asked.

“If you like.” She smiled, showing small teeth. “You might consider holding your breath.”

“Are they contagious?” Jason asked.

Galloran shook his head. “The treatment is unpleasant.”

Jason raised the flap and followed Galloran into the tent, ducking through the entrance. The low ceiling forced them to remain crouched. Tark and

Nedwin lay on mats spread across wooden pallets that took up most of the floor space. Jason and Galloran squatted between them. Pungent vapors swirled up from clay vessels. Tark leaned up on one elbow and smiled, both of his eyes horribly bloodshot. "Kind of you to remember me," he said before launching into a fit of coughing. He hawked up phlegm and spat into a pail.

"Good to hear you coughing again," Galloran said.

"I feel loads better," Tark agreed. "My eyes sting, though. And my mouth feels packed with cotton." He fingered his chapped lips.

Nedwin remained on his side, his breath quick and shallow, his eyes closed.

"You should be back on your feet by tomorrow night," Galloran said.

"So they tell me."

"We ride to Longvale today. I have preparations to make. A guide will bring you and Nedwin to us once you're both whole. Obey whatever instructions your caregiver offers."

"You wouldn't believe some of the remedies I've had to drink," Tark confided with a shudder.

Galloran scratched his beard. "I would. I was treated for lungrot here myself once. Do yourself the kindness of not inquiring about the ingredients."

Tark grimaced. "The treatment almost seems more violent than the ailment." He coughed again.

"Such is the price one must pay to evict airborne parasites. Has Nedwin awakened?"

"Several times," Tark said. "He's been in and out all morning."

Galloran touched Nedwin's shoulder. The freckled man sat up, red eyes blinking. "Sire, am I needed?"

"I just came to bid you adieu," Galloran said. "I'm overjoyed to hear you will recover."

"It will take more than fungi to vanquish me, sire."

"I believe it. You appear to be in competent hands. Farewell until we meet again in Longvale."

"Hope you feel better," Jason gasped. Since his first inhalation inside the tent, he had struggled to limit his breathing. Every whiff of the potent vapors made his eyes burn and the lining of his mouth tingle uncomfortably.

While Tark croaked a reply, Jason stooped out of the tent. Gulping fresh air, he held the flap aside for Galloran. The brief exposure to the heady atmosphere already had his legs feeling unsteady. He wiped tears from his cheeks.

"Back to the others?"

Galloran nodded.

Half an hour later, Jason and his companions rode down the pass on borrowed mounts into Broadvale. The expansive valley was sectioned into a patchwork of farmland nourished by an extensive irrigation system. Crops even flourished on the terraced slopes enclosing the valley, the tiered plots buttressed by retaining walls.

Cornstalks overburdened with ears rose higher than Jason as he sat astride his horse. Workers labored amid countless acres of wheat, binding the harvest into golden sheaves. Fragrant trees were assembled in long rows, limbs laden with bounteous fruitage. One field contained white pumpkins the size of Volkswagen Beetles, and huge yellow squashes contorted like bizarre, bloated sculptures.

Most of the buildings Jason observed were squat dwellings roofed with floral gardens. He also identified several windowless storage facilities. Beside a waterfall on the near side of the valley stood an enormous structure connected to a massive waterwheel.

Jason wondered if he had ever felt this refreshed. Yesterday, death had only been a few minutes behind them. Today they rode at a leisurely pace through the safest nation in Lyrian. The mat he had slept on had not been soft, but it had done the job. He had slumbered long and deep.

Beneath the warm sun, the group traversed the fertile valley at a relaxed pace. They passed a field smothered by tangled, leafy vines.

“What crop is that?” Jason asked.

“Describe it,” Galloran said.

“A bunch of vines that look like they belong in a jungle.”

“Those are kathoras, the most essential of all crops here. The fruit draws impurities from the soil. The vines hoard nutrients. Once the vines mature, the fruit is discarded, and the rest is plowed into the soil. Humankind has yet to discover a superior fertilizer.”

The road began snaking up a rise at the far end of the valley. When they topped the slope, another spacious valley spread out before them, running a long way to the east before it seemed to turn a corner. Like Broadvale, all available land was being cultivated, but this deeper valley also featured a large lake that mirrored the blue sky. Fishing vessels drifted on the water, the distance reducing them to miniatures.

One switchback below Jason and his companions, a pair of riders were ascending out of Crookvale. The riders looked up. One was a young man who bore an uncanny resemblance to Jasher, except he wore a neatly trimmed beard

along his jawline and had darker hair. The other was a lovely woman, her striking eyes a frosty blue.

“Galloran?” the woman called.

“Is that Farfalee?”

“You have sharp ears.” She urged her mount to lope up the final switchback, and dismounted.

Galloran dropped to the ground, his broad grin creating a pair of dimples. “I did not expect to greet you until we reached Longvale.”

“I couldn’t wait,” Farfalee said. She walked to Galloran and embraced him. Tall and slender, she was nearly his height. Her thick black hair was pulled back in intricate braids, and she wore earth-toned clothing, with an elk-hide shawl draped across her shoulders. The days of young womanhood were behind her, but her beauty had yet to fade.

“Greetings, Galloran,” the young man said from astride his piebald mount.

“Could that be Lodan?”

“Yes, sir.”

“He sounds like a man!”

“His First Death ceremony is only weeks away,” Farfalee said. “You should attend.”

“His First Death? Has it been so long? When I last saw Lodan, he came no higher than my waist.”

Farfalee placed a hand on Galloran’s arm. “It has been too many years.” She looked up at the others in the group. “I understand one of you brought my husband’s seed to East Gate.”

“That would be Tark,” Drake said. “He and one other of our number remain at West Gate undergoing treatment for lungrot.”

Farfalee regarded Drake coolly. “Why must those who least deserve misfortune suffer the most?”

Drake gave her a wink. “What? No welcome for me?”

“I’m saving my enthusiasm for your departure,” she said.

Drake shrugged. “Maybe I’ll stay.”

“Until you’re exiled. Shouldn’t take long. It’s really just a formality.”

“Don’t fret, Failie,” he said, turning and raising the hair at the nape of his neck. “You’ll be rid of me soon enough.”

Farfalee gasped, her hands covering her mouth. “Your amar!”

“Karma has spoken,” Drake said simply.

Tears shimmered in her eyes. “Oh, Drake. I had no idea.”



“What happened to it?” Lodan asked, brow steepled in concern.

“My seed failed to form correctly the last time I was reborn,” Drake said. “This will be my final lifetime. I’m at peace with the notion. I’m not sure any lesser incentive could have convinced me to rejoin the living.”

Farfalee plucked uncomfortably at her shawl. “Under the circumstances, I imagine I can persuade the Conclave to defer any—”

Drake laughed harshly. “You think I care how the Conclave rules about me? I’d wear exile like a badge of honor. My only concern would be if they tried to keep me here. Save your influence for cajoling those old windbags into letting our people survive.”

Farfalee sighed tolerantly. “Your charm never ceases to amaze.”

Jason looked at Lodan. “Jasher is your father?”

Drake slapped his forehead. “We’ve skipped introductions! Lodan is the son of Farfalee and Jasher. Farfalee is my eldest sister.” Drake went on to introduce Jason and the others. “It was Lord Jason who helped me find the will to forsake Harthenham,” he finished.

“You changed his mind about something?” Farfalee exclaimed. “Surely you must be a sorcerer.”

“All I did was provide an opportunity,” Jason replied. “Without Drake, we wouldn’t have fought our way free.”

“My brother has always been handy in a fight,” Farfalee said. “The question tends to be whether he’ll see it through to the end. Galloran, is it true you seek audience with the Conclave?”

“I come to discuss matters of great significance.”

“Were you aware that I now sit as an elder?”

“You’re one of the windbags?” Drake gasped.

She raised her eyebrows. “Jeneva abandoned the Vales, Prizette refuses to serve, and Lubella is in the ground. I have fixed your hearing for tomorrow.”

“So soon?” Galloran said.

“Your arrival made waves,” Farfalee explained. “We’ve already received a formal complaint from the emperor. To hear him tell it, you’re wanted criminals who murdered a dozen guards on a bridge. Apparently we interfered with the arrest of nefarious fugitives. The message even cited a signed confession by a member of your party. A displacer, no less.”

“All distortions,” Galloran said. “Maldor drew first blood when he attacked my home and slew a number of my people.”

Farfalee held up a hand. "Nobody gives any real credence to the charges. You and the emperor are at war. What concerns some is that the emperor is behaving as though he now has a grievance with us."

"Absurd!" Drake blustered. "The emperor was indisputably in the wrong sending troops up our pass!"

Farfalee eyed her brother. "I'm certain you can imagine his arguments. It was a small force, obviously not meant to invade the Vales, but rather to bring murderous criminals to justice. Outlaws whom we protected with our troops and whom we are now harboring. Modest imperial forces are currently encamped outside the passes to both gates. Maldor demands we turn all of you over to his representatives immediately."

"Or what?" Drake scoffed. "He'll invade? With what army? The bulk of his forces are tied up besieging Kadara! Even with the full strength of his armies behind the endeavor, he wouldn't dare attack us until the rest of Lyrian has been thoroughly cowed. He's acquainted with our defenses at the gates and along the rims of both gorges, and he can't lay siege to a self-sufficient kingdom."

"But he can openly seek to burn our seeds," Farfalee responded. "He can stop pretending to respect our strength and formally declare war."

Drake shook his head. "That day is inevitable. Why hide from it? Why not commence hostilities while his forces are divided and we might actually have a chance to harm him?"

"You know the concerns," Farfalee sighed. "The longer we have to prepare, the more likely we can endure the eventual assault. Our warriors would be much more vulnerable on offense than on defense. If the emperor wants a fight with us, he'll have to best us on a familiar battleground that we've been prepping for centuries."

Drake chuckled cynically. "The only catch being that if we have no offense, we'll never *win*."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Farfalee said. "You know I'm with you on this issue. But many among us would rather delay the confrontation for as long as possible. They imagine that our defenses could prove so strong that Maldor will ignore the Vales and content himself with governing the rest of the continent."

"Lunacy," Galloran grunted.

"Agreed," Farfalee said. "Maldor's ambition knows no bounds. He will never be content so long as the greatest threat to his rule survives."

Galloran spoke gravely. "Let him finish with the other kingdoms of Lyrian, give him time to marshal his forces, time to craft the attack of his choosing, and these Vales will burn."

Farfalee arched an eyebrow. "I take it this will be the subject of the Conclave?"

Galloran gave a nod. "After imparting some news, I intend to argue that the Amar Kabal should terminate their treaty with Maldor and actively rebel against him."

Farfalee placed a hand on his shoulder. "Should your motion fail, your opponents among my people will seek to turn you over to the emperor."

"I understand the stakes. What are the chances of success?"

Farfalee frowned. "Unfavorable. The climate here grows ever more cautious. None wish to acknowledge the threat the emperor could pose in fifty years. Some are talking of flight."

"Preposterous!" Drake blurted. "Where would they flee? The northern hinterlands?"

"Some have suggested as much. Others have spoken of exploring the far reaches of the western ocean."

"Why not a ladder to the moon?" Drake proposed.

"Who currently serves on the Conclave?" Galloran asked.

"Pallas, Dregan, Naman, Ilestra, and myself. Be forewarned, Naman has gained serious influence, and no argument will quiet his skepticism. A majority of our citizens currently side with him. In these uncertain times, when the other kingdoms of Lyrian are either subdued or under siege, our people prefer the idea of defending familiar territory rather than sacrificing themselves abroad on a hopeless offensive."

Galloran cleared his throat. "If an offensive is indeed hopeless, such sentiments would be justified. I will endeavor to demonstrate otherwise."

"May you succeed where others have failed," Farfalee said earnestly. "An unflinching examination of how best to oppose the rising power of Felrook is long overdue."

Galloran reached for his horse. "If the Conclave intends to hear me on the morrow, we ought to keep riding."

Farfalee and Galloran returned to their mounts. As they descended the looping path, Lodan fell in beside Jason. Once Jason explained his friendship with Jasher, Lodan insisted Jason recount all that he could remember about their time together. Jason told how the seedman had rescued him from an

ambush of manglers and conscriptors. He related their travels through the Sunken Lands, including Jasher's courage battling giant toads. His tale culminated by detailing how Jasher had sacrificed his life to enable an escape from Harthenham.

Lodan absorbed the information, obviously grateful for any anecdote about the father he had not seen for years. "I envy you," he admitted once Jason had finished. "I've longed to be abroad with my father on adventures like the ones you describe."

"His seed is in the ground?"

"It was the only way he could have reentered the Vales. He should be with us in a week or so. I can hardly wait! Of course, after his rebirth, he'll be expelled again. His banishment remains in force."

"So you haven't ... died yet?"

"This is my first lifetime. There aren't many others my age. Eldrin designed our race to become less fertile over the years. Hardly any of our women can have babies anymore."

"Farfalee mentioned your First Death," Jason said. "How does that work?"

"When I die for the first time, the physical condition of my body will become permanently sealed to my amar. Thereafter I will be reborn at exactly the same age as when I first experienced death. My memories will continue to accumulate, but my body will look the same every time. There's a big ceremony involved. I've lived nearly twenty years, the age at which most of my people choose to embrace the First Death. I've been working to build up my strength and endurance, so that ever after I'll be born in good health."

"Wow. So they'll kill you?"

"Just this body. I'll be reborn into an identical one, which will age until I perish and my seed is replanted. The First Death is necessary. It would defeat the purpose of having an amar if I lived a long life only to be reborn over and over as an old man on my deathbed."

"Makes sense," Jason said. "Do you know how much you look like your father?"

"I hear that often, especially from my mother."

They continued in silence. Jason tried to absorb the beauty around him—the smell of ripe crops in fertile soil, the splashing of a lively brook, the way cloud shadows gradually slid across the wheat fields.

They stopped for lunch at the edge of the lake. Jason sat on a rock near the water, chewing on a hunk of pumpkin bread. Corinne came and sat beside him,

picking at a muffin.

“Good muffin?” Jason asked.

“I like the nuts. I can still hardly believe we made it here.”

“It looked bleak.” Jason motioned toward the lake with his bread. “This sure beats angry soldiers trying to kill you.”

“I would take the soldiers over the swamp,” Corinne said, brushing hair back from her eyes. “Even when I was exhausted and frightened we were going to die, part of me kept insisting how pleasant it was to be actually doing something.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “You must have had a serious case of boredom.”

“It may sound ridiculous, but I truly felt that way.” She sighed. “After all the loneliness followed by the danger, these vales feel even more heavenly.”

“I’ll agree with that.” Jason stared at the water, groping for something winning to say. “You did well. I was impressed you could keep up.”

“Why?” She seemed mildly offended.

“Because I was worn out, and I can’t imagine you’ve had much exercise in a long time.”

“More than you might think. The exercises father prescribed for me were quite rigorous, and I performed them every day.”

“With your sword?”

“Mainly. Jumping, lunging, rolling, footwork patterns. You’d weep for me if you knew how much I’ve swung my sword at nothing. I am quite the specialist at dispatching imaginary villains.”

“I bet. Show me your routine.”

Her cheeks flushed as she looked over her shoulder at where the others were eating. “Not here in front of everyone.”

“Why not?”

“Would you want to?”

“Good point.”

“Ask me later, when I won’t make such a spectacle.”

“Ferrin sometimes trains me in swordplay. He’s really good. You should join us.”

“I’d like that.”

Jason swallowed his last bite of pumpkin bread, pleased to have made a connection with Corinne. He found a flat rock and winged it sidearm out onto the water, where it took three good skips and a few small ones. Corinne grabbed a rock and imitated his throw. The stone skipped twice before plopping out of view.

Rachel came up behind them. "I vote we stay in the Seven Vales. I have a feeling I could get used to it here."

"I agree," Corinne said wistfully. "Maybe we can convince father to argue for us all to be made honorary seed people."

Jason pondered the possibility of remaining in the Seven Vales. He considered the lake, the mountains, the farmland. This was the nicest place he'd visited in Lyrian. If Galloran successfully convinced the Amar Kabal to resist Maldor, what would Jason really have to contribute? He was no general, no warrior, not even a wannabe wizard like Rachel. His role in the rebellion might be ending. If the talks went well, he, Rachel, and Corinne really could win the opportunity to wait out the war here in paradise.

"Let's hope your dad makes a good case," Jason said. "Otherwise we might get kicked out of heaven and sent straight to the alternative."

# THE CONCLAVE

The home of Farfalee and Lodan consisted of three squat, round buildings connected by a pair of arched hallways. Bright flowers adorned the conical roofs, and grapevines thrived atop the halls.

When they had arrived the night before, Jason had missed most of the details in the darkness. He had noticed that part of the reason the buildings looked squat was because they were half underground. After following Lodan to a sleeping mat made from a corklike substance, Jason had stretched out and promptly fallen asleep.

Today, with the sun rising, Jason waited beside an irrigation trench to one side of the house. Freestanding trellises laced with leafy limbs stood around the yard in unusual formations, some cylindrical, others boxy, a few shaped like thick crosses, and a couple curving into spheres. They all bore fruit of varying shapes and sizes.

Lodan had roused him early, asking if he wanted to train. Secretly Jason had wanted more sleep, and was worried that Lodan would easily outclass him sparring with swords, but pride had prevented him from expressing either of those concerns. So here he stood.

Lodan came into view pulling a handcart. Ferrin and Corinne trailed behind him. The foursome gathered in a recently cleared field, and Lodan produced four wooden practice swords, balanced to perfection. They all put on padded tunics, thick gloves, and leather helmets affixed to wire masks. Jason felt both excited and intimidated to try mock combat with the elaborate practice gear.

“Jason tells me you have been performing exercises with your sword for years,” Ferrin said to Corinne. “Show us an example.”

Corinne shot Jason a vengeful glance. She assumed a stance on the balls of her feet, holding the wooden sword poised, then began an elaborate routine, springing forward, shuffling back, wielding the weapon defensively and offensively, darting laterally, and occasionally rolling only to spring back into a

balanced stance. Jason was impressed, especially considering she was wearing a lot of unfamiliar gear that should have disrupted her equilibrium.

She finished with a lunging thrust. "That should give you a general idea," she said. "I always vary the combinations and improvise moves of my own."

"I'm impressed," Ferrin said. "You have solid fundamentals. I saw evidence of practiced footwork and graceful balance. You demonstrated a fluid command of your weapon. Your next step is to employ those skills against another combatant."

"I have often wondered how that would feel," she said.

"Let's find out," Ferrin replied. "Come at me. Focus on offense."

She nodded and charged forward, mounting a spirited assault that kept Ferrin moving backward. Slowly retreating, he blocked her blows, and occasionally tapped her tunic with his sword to show where she was leaving herself open.

"Enough," he finally said. "You have never faced an opponent?"

"Only in my imagination."

"You either have a superlative imagination or else swordsmanship is inheritable. I'm curious. Prepare to defend yourself."

Ferrin launched a vigorous attack, and the wooden swords clacked fiercely. Corinne held her ground at first, then faded back. After some time, Ferrin managed to touch the tip of his sword to her chest a couple times. He patted her on the thigh. Suddenly he lunged, and Corinne spun, deflecting his thrust, and whacked him on the side.

Ferrin stepped back, lifting off his helmet. "That was a trap!"

"You were falling into a pattern," she said.

"You shouldn't be this proficient."

Corinne took off her helmet, grinning, her hair matted. "Truly?"

"I have never seen such natural talent," Ferrin said, shaking his head.

"I may not have had opponents," she said, "but my sword has provided my only recreation for years."

Ferrin turned to Lodan. "What did you think?"

"I think she could give me trouble," he replied.

"Work with her while I spar with Jason. You noticed when she was overswinging?"

"Yes."

"And when she was sneaking in too close?"

"And when she was leaving her left side exposed."

"Good eye. Make the corrections, and then have some fun."



Corinne and Lodan moved away.

Ferrin and Jason sparred as the sun rose higher in the sky. The first hour was straight combat. During the second hour, Ferrin showed Jason some dirty tricks desperate opponents might attempt. Ferrin prepared him for foes who might toss sand, throw a knife, sneak in a kick, or use a number of simple but slippery feints.

By the time Jason finished, his lungs were burning and his clothes were drenched. But he felt more confident about his swordsmanship. The protective gear allowed for a much more authentic combat simulation, and he was beginning to grasp the practical application of many of the drills Ferrin had insisted he endlessly perform.

Lodan appeared with the handcart to collect the gear.

“How’d it go with Corinne?” Jason asked.

“She performed remarkably,” Lodan said. “Until Mother saw us. She insisted we quit so Corinne could start getting ready for the Conclave. Between the two of us, I think Mother was more concerned about me bruising a foreign princess with a wooden sword.”

“Everybody should get to clobber a princess at least once,” Jason said. “What now?”

“Time to wash up.”

Rachel sat alone, her back against an earthen storage bunker across the yard from Farfalee’s house. From three sides the bunker looked like a grassy hillock, but the side facing away from the house contained a heavy wooden door.

Speaking Edomic, Rachel lifted a stone the size of her head into the air. She held it there for some time, her will and focus constant, occasionally muttering phrases to raise it higher or lower. It was a strengthening exercise Chandra had taught her. This stone was one of the heavier objects she had tried to hold steady, but it felt within her limits.

She was already dressed for the Conclave, her formal robes loose in the arms and legs, but more fitted in the shoulders and waist. Artfully embroidered, the outfit looked fancy while remaining very comfortable. The soft moccasins on her feet were the comfiest footwear she had ever worn.

A phrase made the heavy rock rotate briskly. Another phrase made it stop. A third phrase turned it to glass. A final phrase, accompanied by a fierce jolt of willpower, shattered the vitrified rock, scattering angular shards in a cone-

shaped spray. The power she had focused and released left her momentarily breathless.

As the pleasurable rush subsided, Rachel felt quiet contentment at the successful series of commands. She was improving daily—gaining strength, deepening her concentration, and discovering new ways to combine phrases.

The words Orruck had taught her for the summoning of lightning flickered through her mind. She had not yet tried to carry out the command, but she had often repeated the words internally, examining them. The language called for massive opposing charges, which would then become linked by a bolt of lightning. To cast the spell, she would have to pick two objects to charge. She wished she could figure out how to describe minor opposing charges, so she could attempt the spell on a smaller scale.

None of the other phrases she knew described the scope of the desired effect. The fire phrase, for example, just called to heat. It never specified how much heat. The quantity of heat summoned only varied based on what she was trying to accomplish and how much will she put into the effort. She could not figure out how to extract the Edomic equivalent of “massive” from the lightning phrase. For that matter, she couldn’t figure out how to add “massive” to the heat-summoning phrase. In Edomic, the words wove together in such a way that they often became difficult to untangle or rephrase. Combining commands was not too hard. Changing the phrasing got very slippery.

“Rachel!” Jason called, interrupting her reverie.

“I’m here!” she answered, standing and walking around the storage bunker. He stood beside an arching trellis of purple fruit, looking handsome in his robes. Apparently he had bathed after banging swords with Ferrin all morning. She crossed toward him.

“What’s behind the mound?” Jason asked.

“It’s a storage room.”

He lowered his voice. “Steal anything good?”

She reached him just in time to punch him on the arm. “Right, I was stealing stuff from our hosts.”

“Then what were you doing back there? They have an outhouse, you know.”

“Ew, sicko. I was practicing Edomic.”

“Sure you were,” Jason said. “You’re just too embarrassed to admit you were playing hide-and-seek all alone. Rachel hiding, nobody seeking.”

“You got me,” she said. “It’s a homeschool thing. We make our own fun.”

“They said the meeting starts at noon, and we’re riding there in a wagon.”

“You mean the conclave?”

“I thought the Conclave was the group.”

“The group is called the Conclave, and when they preside over a meeting, it’s also called a conclave. I asked Farfalee.”

“Lazy,” Jason complained. He spoke in a mocking voice. “The Conclave is having a conclave. It should be really conclave.” He shook his head. “They should call the meeting something else.”

“Like what?”

He shrugged. “A jamboree.”

“Slip that one into the suggestion box.”

Rachel and Jason found the others waiting in a large, open wagon on the far side of the house. It was the sort of vehicle people back home might have used for hayrides. Rachel felt a little awkward once she saw that the others were ready and waiting. She must have really lost track of time.

“Sorry,” Rachel said, climbing into the bed of the wagon.

“No apologies required,” Galloran said. “I felt you issuing some potent commands. Such dedication to your talent is commendable. I waited until the last moment to send Jason to fetch you.”

Lodan and Farfalee sat up front. Lodan snapped the reins and the team tugged the wagon forward.

They all wore dressy robes. Rachel wondered how they had scrounged enough for everyone. Corinne looked especially gorgeous, her hair woven into elaborate braids. If that girl ever made it to America, she was a supermodel waiting to happen. No surprise that Jason found her so interesting.

“Everyone looks really official,” Rachel commented over the clatter of the wagon.

“It was tricky to outfit Aram,” Ferrin said. “Fortunately, Farfalee had kept some apparel from Lodan’s infancy.”

“Keep it up,” Aram dared him.

Ferrin grinned. “Or perhaps she borrowed the robes from a doll.”

“Do us all a favor and toss your mouth overboard,” Aram replied.

“Not bad,” Ferrin said. “You just earned a truce.”

“Only until the sun goes down,” Aram grumbled.

Rachel sat silently, enjoying the cool breeze, the bright sun, and the pleasant countryside. She wondered idly why they didn’t see more people on the road. Aside from their wagon, the day seemed very still.

She got her answer when they arrived at their destination. The Conclave met in a large amphitheater between five hills. The oval depression descended one concentric ring at a time, forming a bowl large enough to seat thousands. Not only was the sunken amphitheater crammed with seedfolk, but the surrounding hillsides were thronged as well. Nobody had been on the road, because they were already at the conclave!

“I hope we have reserved seats,” Jason said, voicing her thoughts.

“We’ll sit up close,” Galloran said. “How glad we are to be there will depend on how the Conclave rules.”

Lodan remained with the wagon while the others disembarked. Farfalee led them down a long stairway to the bottom of the amphitheater. Galloran kept one hand on Dorsio’s shoulder. Rachel watched the crowd, men and women clad in robes, not many of them beyond middle age. She only spotted one possible teenager, a girl with light brown hair. Nobody looked younger.

As members of the crowd took notice of the procession marching down the stairs, they became quiet. Rachel felt the weight of thousands of eyes staring her way.

At the bottom of the huge bowl, three men and one young girl sat at a bulky stone table surrounded by a flat, open area. There was clearly room at the table for a fifth person.

“Who’s the little girl?” Jason asked.

“Ilestra, the eldest surviving seedwoman,” Farfalee said. “Her First Death happened by accident at age seven. Her latest rebirth occurred only a year ago.”

After the stairs ended, Farfalee gestured toward an empty bench situated front and center. Rachel filed over with the others as Farfalee claimed her seat with the Conclave.

A strapping man with his hair twined in a pair of long braids arose off a bench and strode to a position to one side of the stone table. He was meatier than the typical seedman, and spoke in a strident voice.

“By order of the Conclave, five speaking as one, this emergency conclave is now in session. Galloran, son of Dromidus, will be the sole petitioner. Naman of the Conclave has elected to personally serve as rebutter.”

A murmur rippled through the onlookers.

The heavysset seedman glanced over his shoulder. The man seated at the center of the table dipped his head. The speaker turned and announced. “The Conclave recognizes Galloran.” He withdrew and sat down.

Dorsio guided Galloran to the position vacated by the speaker, then stepped back a few paces. "Forgive my voice," Galloran said, raising it as best he could. "I inhaled an acidic concoction some years back, and it has never been the same."

He sounded plenty loud to Rachel. The audience was silent, and the space seemed to have good acoustics, which helped. Craning her neck to look upward, she figured the crowds on the neighboring hillsides were out of luck.

"I am honored to be back among the Amar Kabal and to stand before this illustrious Conclave," Galloran began.

"We are delighted to see you again," said the seedman in the center, a handsome man with dark-gray eyes and a slightly crooked nose. "Diverse rumors have circulated concerning your fate. We feared you had met your end in the dungeons of Felrook."

"My mind and body were maimed in those dungeons," Galloran said. "But I was eventually released. It has required some time and effort to become functional again."

"What brings you before the Conclave?" the seedman asked.

"I wish for the Amar Kabal to reconsider their current relationship with Maldor. I want to urge your people to support a rebellion."

Murmured reactions percolated through the assemblage. The seedman at the left end of the table stood. Tall and trim with rather wide shoulders, he wore his black hair in a topknot. He had a high forehead, sunken cheeks, and a broad mouth. "We expected this request." He strode around the table to stand opposite Galloran, separated by several paces. "This debate has been settled for some time, unless you have new information to contribute."

"I have a proposal you may not have considered," Galloran said. "And yes, Naman, I also bring new information that could impact your current stance. Pallas, you may recall discussing a particular word with me some years ago."

The seedman seated at the center of the table nodded. "Those specifics may need to remain private."

"No longer," Galloran said. "There has long been a rumor of an Edomic key word that could destroy Maldor. Supposedly the Word had been created by Zokar to keep his dangerous apprentice in check. As it turns out, both myself and my friend Lord Jason, a Beyonder, succeeded in obtaining this key word and speaking it to Maldor. The Word had no effect. It was a fraud."

Garbled commentary arose from the crowd.

“Order!” Pallas called. The onlookers went silent immediately. “No doubt some here have heard of the rumored Word. Most are probably learning of it for the first time. Some, myself included, have harbored a quiet hope that one day this Word would undo the emperor. Is it wise to mention this Word in public?” The question held reprimanding overtones.

“This false Word has diverted the efforts of many,” Galloran said. “Some of the best blood in Lyrian has been spilled searching for it. All along, Maldor had been using the quest for the Word to stall traditional opposition and waste the efforts of his most ardent enemies. As soon as Jason confirmed that the Word was fraudulent, Maldor began slaying those who had guarded the individual syllables. Once the emperor made that move, I decided it was time to publicly debunk the myth, lest any more effort be wasted.”

“Understandable,” Naman said. “This is news, indeed, and you paid a grievous price to secure this information. But consider the reasoning behind our attitude toward Felrook. We have assessed that an offensive against the emperor would be doomed to failure. Therefore, preparing our defenses became the only acceptable policy. If the Word is false, Maldor is even less vulnerable than we had supposed, which only serves to support our current stance.”

All eyes at the table turned to Galloran.

“That is one way to interpret the news,” Galloran acknowledged. “The main reason most kingdoms have avoided open conflict with Maldor is because they do not believe he can be beaten. Many have surrendered to him without a fight. His conquest of Lyrian has only been slowed by kingdoms like Belaria, Hindor, Meridon, and now Kadara, which have elected to defend their borders. The former three kingdoms I mentioned have all fallen, just as Kadara will fall before next year is through.

“As most of you know, I hail from Trensicourt. My father was king. Like the Amar Kabal, Trensicourt hesitated to go to war with Felrook largely because we did not believe that Maldor could be defeated. Part of the justification for our hesitation derived from the hope that the Word provided. In our highest councils, the Word was viewed as a possible alternative to widespread bloodshed. Had we known the Word was false, we would have accepted that the only remaining course of action would have been to unite the remaining free kingdoms and stand against the emperor.”

Naman folded his arms. “We of the Amar Kabal have no intention of kneeling to the emperor. We know that Maldor despises and fears us more than any nation in Lyrian. We understand that there will never be true peace

between us. And we realize that our best chance of resisting Maldor is to force him to bring the war to our gates. We continue to fortify our defenses, knowing that only by repelling his armies will we endure as a people.”

Galloran frowned. “Do you honestly believe the defenses of the Seven Vales can withstand the emperor once the rest of Lyrian has fallen?”

“I would like to think that with proper planning and vigilance, we could hold out for many lifetimes. This is our best hope.”

“You evaded my question,” Galloran said. “Consider the history of your enemy. Consider his resources. Consider his motivation. Do you honestly believe that you can indefinitely keep the emperor out of these Vales?”

Naman pressed his large lips together. “Our defenses will eventually fail.” Some utterances of dismay arose from the gathered multitude. Naman held up a finger. “But if they must resort to an assault on our homeland, our enemies will pay much more dearly to take our lives than if we participate in a desperate offensive abroad.”

“The Vales will eventually fall,” Galloran summarized. “Do you suppose that you can run?”

“For a time,” Naman replied. “We have fallbacks prepared.”

“I agree that you could retreat for a time. Do you imagine that you could run to a place where Maldor will not follow?”

“No,” Naman said. “We might prolong our existence for many lifetimes, but in the end, we will perish. Some talk of fleeing over the sea, but within twenty years Maldor will have massive fleets on both coasts.”

“*Many lifetimes* suggests a very optimistic time frame,” Galloran said. “The emperor will not relent until all of Lyrian is secure. Barring collaborative opposition, you and the drinlings will be the last free people in Lyrian within five years. Rooting out the drinlings will take time, but Maldor will succeed. He will then spend some years mustering his strength, laying plans. By my most optimistic assessment, within twenty years Maldor will attack the Vales from the north and the south simultaneously. In the north he will merely cut off your retreat; from the south he will storm your gates. He will not fight fairly. He will show no mercy. You will die alone and cornered. Some of you will be tortured. Some will be examined. Maldor is curious to study how you were made. In the end, your seeds will burn.”

A boisterous outburst from the assemblage made Rachel cover her ears. Apparently the notion of dying permanently did not sit well with the audience. It took Pallas some effort to restore order.

“These are vile prospects to consider,” Pallas recognized, once he could be heard, “but such are the times in which we live.”

“I have heard your assessment,” Naman said reasonably. “I have answered your questions candidly. Now show me equal courtesy. With the present resources the free kingdoms have at their disposal, is it possible to mount an offensive against the emperor with any reasonable expectation of success?”

Galloran straightened. “I don’t know.”

The crowd reacted raucously. Again Pallas called for silence.

“I find myself wondering why we convened this conclave,” Naman said, earning a chuckle from the onlookers.

“I believe there is hope for a successful offensive, or I would not have traveled here,” Galloran explained. “Nevertheless, I do not intend to lead the free people of Lyrian to a hasty demise on a hopeless campaign. I do not desire to spend your lives casually. Without a truly viable offensive strategy, I would rather you died defending your homes. My concern is that if we never take the offensive, there is no chance we can win.”

“What are you here to propose?” Pallas asked.

“We have a small window of opportunity while the armies of Maldor toil in the east against Kadara. His forces have simultaneously besieged their three largest cities, which entails a massive commitment of resources. I am the heir to Trensicourt. I am ready to regain my kingdom and to lead a rebellion. I have come into possession of a vast new stockpile of orantium. I cannot divulge the location publicly, but in private I will share the whereabouts of hundreds of globes, including a score of the larger spheres known as gatecrashers.”

This earned an excited buzz from the crowd.

“I believe we can also enlist the drinlings. They only fell out of the war after Kadara abused them. I expect we can also arouse Meridon. My sources there report that Maldor does not have a strong enough presence to suppress a revolt.”

“Assuming all of this is true,” Naman said, “how does it amount to sufficient power to combat the emperor? He has the resources of more than twenty kingdoms at his disposal. Not to mention the displacers, the manglers, the giants, and the torivors.”

“I do not imagine we could stand against his full might,” Galloran said. “We would have to outmaneuver him. Fight the battles we can win. Earn victory one step at a time.”

“Such tactics could yield modest success in the short term,” Naman allowed. “But once the emperor has dealt with Kadara and brings his full strength against



us, we would fall.”

“We could fall,” Galloran admitted. “But embracing any other strategy makes our doom certain.”

Naman shook his head. “Not only will we fall just as certainly if we pursue an offensive like you describe, we will fall sooner than with any other tactic. Our nation applauds your motives. For years the citizens of Trensicourt have tacitly followed the orders of imperial puppets. We would welcome them to openly resist the emperor. And we would rejoice to add orantium to our defensive stores. But we have no need for that breed of heroism that only hastens destruction.”

“You foresee absolutely no hope for a successful offensive,” Galloran said. “This is the problem?”

“Correct,” Naman replied.

“Do you or any among the Amar Kabal profess the gift of prophecy?”

“Not prophecy. But we have centuries of experience with observation and reason.”

“I have a proposal,” Galloran stated. “There remains a living oracle in Lyrian. The true gift of prescience survives in the Temple of Mianamon. Why not consult the oracle to see if a combined offensive could succeed? Get a definitive word on the matter? If the oracle foresees no possibility of success, I will wholly support your defensive posture. In fact, I will adopt the same philosophy with Trensicourt.”

The amphitheater was silent. All eyes regarded Naman.

“I have no particular objection to consulting the oracle,” Naman finally ventured. “Yet you came here with imperial troops in pursuit, Galloran. You have been informed that the emperor has demanded we release you and your comrades into his custody. A cynical man might call your desire to appeal to the oracle an effort to postpone the apprehension of your friends.”

Galloran’s posture changed, as if getting ready for a fistfight. Even without eyes, his expression hardened. “Would you turn me over to Maldor, Naman? Would you hand him my daughter?”

“We might consider handing over the displacer in your company,” Naman replied accusingly.

The crowd gasped.

“The displacer Ferrin betrayed Felrook to join the rebellion,” Galloran affirmed. “To prove his sincerity he gave me a chunk of his neck, which I could

use to dispose of him at my whim. I heartily vouch for the loyalty of all in my party. Otherwise I would not have brought them here.”

“You chose a poor hour to test our hospitality,” Naman said. “You knew what signals your presence would send. You knew that our relations with Felrook have never been more tenuous.”

“Your relations become more tenuous as Maldor fears you less. Obviously, he fears my presence here. Why else would he show such interest? Naman, my understanding is that you control the military.”

“I serve as High Commander.”

“Then, as a military expert, please demonstrate a single instance when Maldor has respected weakness.” Galloran paused, but Naman offered no response. “If you can, name one occasion where bowing to his will forestalled invasion or yielded any measurable benefit?”

“When has provoking the emperor led to prosperity?” Naman countered.

“Ask Drake, or any man in Harthenham,” Galloran growled. “I can identify many who have gained respect or reward for defying the emperor. Unless you mean to surrender, it is the only sane course. Those who treat Maldor as an honest and reasonable adversary soon discover that he is neither. If you are so afraid of Felrook that you close your gates to friends and scurry to obey imperial mandates, your cause is already lost. You spoke of Trensicourt as being run by imperial puppets. Who is pulling your strings here in the Vales? Imperial forces defied your treaty by chasing us across forbidden neutral territory, and you react how? With apologies? Those same forces remain camped outside of your passes unchallenged. You lead your military? A cynical man might label you a coward.”

Naman stiffened. “No one degrades my honor!” he thundered. “If you had eyes, I would challenge you this instant!”

Galloran faced him silently. The tension of the moment had Rachel wringing her fingers. Galloran drew his sword, the blade gleaming brilliantly in the sunlight. He did not speak loudly. “If naming your deeds sullies your honor, perhaps I’m not the man to blame. I need no eyes to crush a cockroach. I accept your challenge.”

Naman looked off-balance. “Don’t be ridiculous. Striking down a blind opponent will bring me no satisfaction.”

Galloran strode toward him, sword held ready. “When you speak of duels to a king in public, you had best have a weapon ready.”

“This is madness,” Naman protested, looking to Pallas.

Pallas rose. “Must this escalate to violence?”

Galloran stopped directly in front of the stone table. "I was not the first to mention a challenge."

"Very well," Naman said. "You insist too fervently. If you desire to meet your end with a sword in hand, I will oblige."

"You don't foresee me emerging victorious?" Galloran asked.

"No, and if you expect that outcome, your judgment is far more corrupted than I had suspected."

"We have plenty of witnesses present," Galloran said. "Sufficient space. Have you a sword?"

Naman drew a sword from beneath his robes. "Nothing so fine as yours, but I stand ready." His gray blade looked a little longer than the torivorian weapon.

Drake arose. "Let me stand in for Galloran," he declared. "Even if he had eyes, I would not sit by and allow a man of his stature to cross swords with one of our people."

Naman sized up Drake with a smirk. "I'm willing."

"I am not," Galloran said. "I fight my own duels. There are more senses than sight."

"Please, Your Majesty," Drake implored. "Do me this honor."

"I appreciate the gesture," Galloran said. "Be seated."

Drake plopped down beside Rachel. "Naman is an accomplished swordsman," he muttered. "This can't end well."

Rachel felt words in her mind. *Keep your eyes on the fight, especially on Naman. You must serve as my eyes.*

Galloran assumed a fighting stance. "Would you be so kind, Pallas?"

"Begin," Pallas said solemnly.

Rachel tried not to blink. How well could he use her eyes? Was it possible for Galloran to fight effectively while only viewing himself and his opponent from off to the side? She could not imagine how he would stay oriented.

*Focus on opening your mind to me,* Galloran conveyed in response. *Corinne will be doing the same.*

Rachel exerted her will, attempting to send everything she saw toward Galloran's mind.

"Win or lose, this duel will not resolve your problems," Naman warned, slowly approaching Galloran. "The current quarrel is between the two of us."

"Should I fall, I trust Lord Jason to speak on behalf of our cause," Galloran said.

Naman extended his sword probingly and Galloran knocked it aside. Naman moved in, slashing aggressively, and the swords clashed, ringing almost musically. Galloran pivoted so that his back was mostly to Rachel, but on a diagonal, so his body didn't impede a view of Naman. Galloran deflected another fierce sequence of blows.

"How are you doing that?" Naman asked, backing off. "Are you truly blind?"

Galloran cast aside his blindfold in reply.

Their blades met again, and Galloran's sword became a blur. Naman paced backward sloppily, struggling to hold off the onslaught. Rachel could see fear and disbelief in Naman's eyes. Then Galloran lopped off his sword hand and impaled the seedman without hesitation.

Galloran withdrew his sword, and Naman fell to his knees, his expression bewildered, one hand over his punctured chest. The seedman tipped onto his side.

Rachel stared up at the crowd. Most faces gaped in astonishment. Some people shifted uncomfortably. The only voices spoke in whispers.

*Thank you,* Galloran sent to Rachel. *Well done.* She could sense weariness behind his psychic message. There was a slight tremble in his hand as he wiped his sleeve across his forehead. He looked pallid and winded. She realized that the effort of seeing through her eyes must have required much more energy and willpower than mentally exchanging words. She wondered how apparent it was to the other bystanders how greatly the endeavor had taxed him. Galloran was doing his best to disguise his fatigue.

Galloran sheathed his sword. "Dorsio, please fetch his seed and place it on the table." He raised his voice. "As you all know, Naman is not truly gone. He'll be younger and stronger a couple of months from now. I regret the interruption. We'll need a new rebutter."

Drake chuckled softly, covering his grin with one hand. He spoke in hushed wonder. "I've never seen a man fight like that. Such economy of motion. It was over the instant Galloran attacked. Imagine if he could see!"

The four seed people at the stone table conversed privately. Finally Pallas addressed Galloran. "I will rebut. Although not without trepidation."

The crowd laughed uneasily.

Dorsio placed Naman's seed on the table and returned the fallen blindfold to Galloran, who covered his gaping sockets. He already looked more steady than immediately following the duel. Pallas walked to where Naman had stood previously.

“Where were we?” Pallas asked.

“I believe Naman was insinuating we hand over my daughter to the emperor,” Galloran said flatly.

“I do not envision us handing anyone over to Maldor,” Pallas said. “All other considerations aside, it is true that letting him flout our treaties and issue mandates will only reduce his respect for us. We may have begun to lose sight of that truth. Galloran is a sworn friend of our people. I move that our guests should enjoy our full protection. Unless there are any dissenters?” He looked first to the rest of the Conclave and then scanned the audience. Nobody volunteered a complaint. Rachel felt herself relax a bit.

“Is the vote unanimous?” Pallas asked the Conclave.

Three voices responded, “Aye.”

Pallas nodded. “So be it. Galloran, I wish to explore your proposal regarding the prophetess.”

“Naman was quick to dismiss the possibility of me besting him in a duel,” Galloran said. “Yet there he lies. I imagine that most present would also doubt the feasibility of vanquishing the menace who lurks in the Drowned City.”

The suggestion caused an incredulous outburst.

Galloran raised his hands until the overlapping comments subsided. “I can hear the disbelief. Rachel, would you stand up?”

Rachel complied, keeping her eyes on Galloran, trying not to think about the soaring rows of seed people all around her. “This young woman is a Beyonder and an Edomic adept. She slew the menace this week. You will now find the Drowned City deserted.”

The subsequent uproar sounded more skeptical than pleased.

“Believe me or not, when you investigate, my words will be confirmed,” Galloran said. “My point is that although an offensive would certainly be risky, we would be foolish to utterly ignore the option. Victory has occurred against difficult odds before. In our present circumstances, defense can delay, but it cannot prevail. The oracle at Mianamon has been reliable for centuries. Why not send a delegation to investigate whether an offensive could succeed? If it can, we plan an attack. If it can’t, we concentrate with full purpose on prolonging the inevitable.”

“This delegation would have to include seedfolk,” Pallas said.

“Naturally,” Galloran assented. “The delegation should arrive in six or seven weeks. You could start sending eagles to Mianamon for a response at that point.”

“It will not be easy for a delegation to reach the destination,” Pallas observed.

“The prophetess can only read the futures of those present,” Galloran stressed.

“I understand, but how do you propose they get there? The emperor will be watching our passes.”

“The emperor has unfinished business with me,” Galloran said. “You need to discuss the status of your treaty. We will journey to Felrook together on a diplomatic mission. That should prevent men from accusing me of coming here to hide. It will also help preserve the illusion that your people are willing to bargain with Maldor. Besides, my presence would only hinder the delegation to Mianamon, given the road they must travel.”

“And which road is that?” Pallas asked.

“There are other ways out of these Vales besides the passes,” Galloran said. “The details should be contemplated in private.”

“I’m amenable to this course of action,” Pallas said. “Our current strategy is founded on the proposition that an offensive would be ineffective. With our survival in the balance, we would be wise to verify that premise.”

“Do you need to add a member to the Conclave for the vote?” Galloran asked.

“Not if three or more agree,” Pallas said.

All four approved the proposal.

# THE DELEGATION

The following evening, Jason sat between Nedwin and Tark, using flatbread to scoop various mashed preparations from wooden bowls. Since the bowls were communal, everyone tore the dense bread to create one mouthful at a time. Each time he dipped the bread, a twinge of pain reminded Jason that his index finger remained bruised and swollen after a practice duel with Lodan earlier in the day. Tark seemed to eat without enthusiasm, but Nedwin gulped down food, as if the lungrot and his stay in the sicktent had never happened.

“You should try the purple stuff,” Jason suggested to Tark. “It’s sweet and nutty.”

Tark held up a hand. “Ever since the treatment, everything has a foul aftertaste. Even water.” He smacked his lips discontentedly. “It’s unfortunate.”

“I don’t mind it,” Nedwin said, shoveling a large bite of flatbread and orange mush into his mouth. “Twists the flavor a little.”

Tark grimaced. “It’s more like a glimpse of how the food would taste after it spoiled.”

Nedwin shrugged. “I’m not a reliable judge. Nothing has tasted quite right since Felrook—different shades of bland.”

“That’s too bad,” Corinne said. “The food is delicious.” She had a smudge of purple goo on the corner of her mouth.

“Renetta told me the aftertaste would fade after a week or so,” Tark added.

“I’m surprised how pleasant it is to sample dishes from my homeland again,” Drake said, motioning for Corinne to dab her lips. She did so with a blush. “For all the variety represented at Harthenham, we seldom got fare like this.”

“I’ll wager they fed you meat,” Aram grumbled, his voice deep now that the sun was down.

“From the common to the exotic,” Drake confirmed. “Have you ever tried ground sloth? Wonchut? Horned shark?”

“Don’t torture me,” Aram said. “At this point, I’d settle for chipmunk.”

“Speaking of the Eternal Feast,” Nedwin said, voice halting, eyes remote, “did you ever encounter Tristan, the former Earl of Geer?”

“I remember Tristan well,” Drake said, sharing a glance with Jason. Now that Jason thought about it, if Nedwin packed on about eighty pounds, he would look a lot like the husky nobleman who had tried to escape with them.

Nedwin bowed his head, drumming the fingers of one hand against his hairline. “Then the rumors were true. When I was held in Trensicourt, Copernum claimed that my brother had challenged him for the chancellorship and had lost. I sought him after my release, but heard he had accepted an invitation to Harthenham. I never imagined him surrendering.”

“He died helping us escape,” Jason said softly.

“What?” Nedwin asked, blinking.

“He came with us, but didn’t make it. He fell in battle.” Jason thought it best not to add that he had been savaged by a pack of fierce dogs.

Nedwin smiled and made a choked sound that was half sob, half laugh. He wiped his eyes. “He met his end bravely?”

“Helped save us all,” Drake confirmed. “He died with blood on his sword.”

“That’s a weight off me,” Nedwin said, eyes moist. “Tristan always valued his honor. He taught me the meaning of the word. I’m relieved that he regained some of it before the end. I’m glad I brought it up. I’d been afraid to ask.”

Jason found himself clenching his jaw to resist tears. He was thankful the tidings seemed to gladden Nedwin rather than depress him. Nedwin had suffered much more than his fair share.

Wiping her mouth with a napkin, Rachel stood. “Come on,” she said to Jason.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Galloran’s back,” she said. “He needs to speak to us.”

A door opened, and Farfalee entered. She, Galloran, and Dorsio had left earlier in the day to confer with Pallas and the other members of the Conclave. “Jason?” Farfalee summoned. “Rachel?”

Jason followed Farfalee and Rachel into an arched hallway.

“I’m thinking of a number,” Jason said.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Rachel sighed.

“Come on. It’s between one and five.”

“Two?”

“Pi.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “I can only read minds close to my intelligence.”



“Oh. Like clams? Inchworms? Bread mold?”

“More like wizards, torivors, and supercomputers.”

Farfalee led them to a door and entered with them.

“I didn’t mean pie like you eat,” Jason explained. “I meant pi like the number.”

“I get it,” Rachel said. “I was calculating the area of circles in second grade.”

“I wasn’t,” Jason admitted. “I was playing with friends.”

Galloran cleared his throat. He sat on a mat behind a table, Dorsio at one side, a grim seedman on the other, his dark hair trimmed rather short except for the roll at the nape of his neck. They all wore robes somewhat dusty from recent travel.

Jason glanced at Rachel. “Galloran says you shouldn’t joke about my intellect or it might swallow yours whole.”

“Now you’re hearing his thoughts too?” Rachel replied.

Jason gave a small shrug. “Galloran says don’t be jealous, but we’ve been using telepathy since our first meeting. Right, Your Majesty?”

“Jason and I share a quieter understanding,” Galloran said diplomatically. “Please, sit; we have much to discuss. This is Sakar, a friend of Jasher and Farfalee.”

Sakar nodded a greeting.

Jason and Rachel sat on mats across from Galloran. Farfalee occupied a mat at the side of the low table.

“You met with the Conclave?” Rachel asked.

“Indeed,” Galloran said. “The delegation to Mianamon will depart the morning after tomorrow.”

“You want us to go,” Jason said. “Why else would Galloran have singled them out for a conversation?”

“No,” Galloran said. “You have already sacrificed so much for the sake of Lyrian. The trip to Mianamon will be dangerous, and if successful, the journey will only lead to more peril. This request has nothing to do with my wants. Only our need.”

“So you need us to go,” Rachel said.

Galloran sighed heavily. “My hopes that an offensive could be successful largely rest on the fact that the oracle of Mianamon summoned you from the Beyond to aid our world. She must have seen your involvement making a vital difference. Since you’ve already contributed more than I could have dreamed, your roles in our struggle might be complete. However, if the oracle truly

foresaw a chance for victory, I suspect your involvement may remain integral to our success. The only way to know for certain will be to bring you before her.”

“You told Pallas that the oracle can only see the futures of those present,” Jason said.

“Those are certainly the futures the oracle can see most clearly,” Galloran confirmed. “For that reason, members of the Amar Kabal should be in attendance, as should some drinlings, as well as any others who may play a key role in the rebellion.”

“What if we find out that our roles are finished?” Rachel wondered.

“Then I’ll do everything in my power to shield you from the upcoming hostilities,” Galloran said.

“Won’t you need to be there?” Jason asked. “Your role might be the most crucial.”

Galloran nodded. “For that reason, after my diplomatic mission to Felrook, I will seek to rejoin you at the Last Inn, the southernmost outpost before the jungle. In case I fail to arrive, Corinne will have to join your delegation, prepared to fill my role in my absence. As the last true heir to Trensicourt, she should be able to rally the kingdom under her leadership, if necessary.”

Jason could tell that Galloran didn’t relish the thought of that responsibility falling to his daughter. “Why are you going to Felrook at all? It seems too dangerous.”

“Partly to satisfy the Amar Kabal,” Galloran said. “My presence will reduce the appearance that they are trying to secretly harbor fugitives. I’ll share in their diplomatic immunity, and consequently I do not expect Maldor to move openly against me. He does not yet crave a war with the People of the Seed. I believe this will be the safest way for a blind man to escape the Vales. Also, I have some unfinished business of my own with the emperor.”

“Sounds risky,” Jason muttered.

“We’re all out of safe options,” Galloran replied.

“I have a question,” Rachel said. “If we have to be at Mianamon in order for the oracle to prophesy, how did Tark’s friend Simeon learn about how Jason and I could help Lyrian?”

“I’m not sure Simeon ascertained many specifics,” Galloran said. “He may have simply learned that you two could make a significant difference and how his own efforts could summon you.”

Jason rubbed his hands together anxiously. “With us there, the oracle should be able to fill in the details more clearly?”

“In theory,” Galloran said. “Predicting the future is an uncertain endeavor. You can never guarantee how much or how little will be visible to even the most powerful oracle.”

“It would be nice to know for sure why we were brought here,” Rachel said.

“The price of that knowledge may be high,” Galloran warned. “You’ll take a precarious northern passage through rugged mountains, until you reach the tundra of the hinterlands. From there you will move eastward, paralleling the mountain chain. You won’t be able to go south until you reach Ebera, the Forsaken Kingdom.”

“None who enter Ebera are permitted to leave,” Farfalee interrupted. “The Forsaken Kingdom lies on the eastern coast of Lyrian, north of Kadara and the fertile hills of the drinlings. The infamous wizard Kel Jerud built his tower there, a stronghold known as the Black Spire. Before his death, he warned that his abode was protected by nightmarish wards. He was the mightiest wizard of his time. Centuries after his death, a group of treasure hunters finally defied his warning, lured by the promise of unguessable riches. The fortune seekers unleashed a virulent plague that transformed them into the walking dead.”

Galloran continued the narrative. “Only the geography of Ebera, accompanied by the swift action of King Linus, ruler of Ebera when the plague broke out, saved all of Lyrian from infection. North of Ebera lies frozen wasteland, west lie the mountains, east lies the ocean, and south lies the Silver River. Linus burned all of his shipyards and ferries, cutting off Ebera from the rest of the continent. When the sickness spread quickly to the various cities of Ebera, he established walled settlements for those not yet infected by the plague, and forbade any citizen of Ebera, healthy or not, from leaving. Linus warned Kadara of the plague, and Kadarians have patrolled the Silver River ever since, to help prevent an infected person from crossing.”

“We get to go there?” Jason asked.

“The current state of Ebera is unknown,” Sakar said. “Surely the population has dwindled and grown sparse. The drinlings help Kadara patrol the Silver River. I’m not wanted by the emperor. While you go through the mountains and across the tundra, I can take a more direct road to consult with the drinlings. I’ve dealt with them in the past. Hopefully, they can help us get you across the Silver River and aid you on your way to the Last Inn.”

“The way will be hard and fraught with uncertainty,” Galloran said, “but that is part of the reason we doubt Maldor or his minions will anticipate this road. We have no surety about what to expect in Ebera. We’re hoping that if you stay

in the wilderness, you might slip through the Forsaken Kingdom unnoticed. But there is a significant element of risk. None will be compelled to join the delegation, including the two of you.”

“The Seven Vales represent the most secure sanctuary in Lyrian,” Farfalee said. “Either one of you would be welcome to remain here as guests until the end of your days ... or for as long as our nation stands.”

“Who else will join the delegation to Mianamon?” Jason asked.

“I intend to invite all of our companions besides Dorsio,” Galloran said. “There will also be six seedfolk.”

“Including me,” Farfalee said. “I will represent the Conclave.”

“Really?” Rachel asked.

“We all must do our part,” Farfalee responded.

“Rachel,” Galloran said. “Jason. You’ve had little choice regarding much of your involvement against Maldor. This time the decision whether to participate is truly yours. As Farfalee said, the Amar Kabal would grant you safe harbor if desired. By staying here, you would have a fair chance of avoiding violence for years to come. I will still do everything in my power to help you get home as soon as that option becomes feasible. Should this rebellion fail, the Seven Vales will almost certainly be the last nation to fall. If you need time to deliberate, you’re welcome to respond tomorrow.”

“I don’t need to wait,” Jason said. “I came back to Lyrian on purpose. Our best chance of getting home is to defeat Maldor, and if my help might be important, I want to know. If my help isn’t needed, that would also be good to find out.”

“I’m with Jason,” Rachel said. “You can count on us to go to Mianamon.”

Galloran smiled. “The need is great, or else I would not consider this strategy. You will be accompanied by some of the finest warriors in Lyrian. The way will be difficult, but I do not believe it will be impossible, or else I would not involve my daughter.”

“Tomorrow evening we’ll travel to the trailhead to quietly get an early start,” Farfalee said.

“Anything else you would like to know?” Galloran asked.

“What about all of the orantium in the Drowned City?” Jason asked.

“The Conclave sent a message by eagle to a small group of seedfolk who man a permanent observation station in the trees near the northeastern corner of the swamp. They will recover the orantium in the rafts and dive for more at the Drowned City.”

“Yesterday you mentioned how we killed the menace,” Rachel recalled. “You also talked about finding a large stash of orantium. Some who listened might guess that the orantium was in the Drowned City.”

“Which is why we sent the eagle,” Galloran said. “We have no reason to believe spies have infiltrated the Amar Kabal, but we can’t be too cautious. Pallas is doing everything in his power to quickly and quietly acquire the explosives.”

“One more question,” Jason said. “Rachel told me you were able to psychically use her eyes to win the duel yesterday. If she stayed with you, couldn’t you keep on borrowing her sight?”

“It was a desperate gambit,” Galloran said. “Viewing myself and Naman that way required extraordinary mental exertion. You may have noticed, after I maneuvered into position and got used to the perspective, I went for a hasty victory. Had Naman held off my attack, exhaustion would have soon led to my demise. It was a calculated risk, and one that would not be very useful outside of a controlled environment. Could I see through her eyes again? Certainly. Could it ever be useful again? Possibly. Am I willing to bring Rachel to Felrook, even under supposed diplomatic immunity? Given her gift for Edomic and her status as a Beyonder, absolutely not.”

“I’d come if you wanted,” Rachel said.

“You’re brave and loyal. But no, I would honestly prefer you far from Felrook. If Maldor understands your capabilities, he’ll be more interested in apprehending you than any of us. Your presence could jeopardize the mission.”

“Then I guess I have a final question too,” Rachel said. “What can we do to prepare between now and when we leave?”

“Get rest,” Farfalee advised. “It will soon be in short supply.”

From the southern rim of Highvale, Rachel gazed down at the fat crescent of Northvale, and farther to mist-enshrouded Roundvale. A steep, serpentine path had led up from Roundvale to these smaller, higher valleys, but the way was about to become impassable by horses.

The Amar Kabal had no intention of improving the northward trails. Farfalee had explained that the few routes through the mountains were tricky to find or to follow. The narrow, treacherous windings helped ensure that any attack from the north would come as a trickle rather than a flood. Not that anyone lived north of the Vales. Still, in the warmer months, an invading army could theoretically gain access by crossing the tundra from the ocean.

Rachel glanced to one side, where Drake sat astride a chocolate brown stallion. He had given Mandibar to Galloran for the journey south. She and Drake had wakened early and slipped away from camp. The delegation had ascended to Highvale in the dark, and he had insisted that she shouldn't miss the view from the southern rim. His flat features did not leave the seedman much of a profile as he glowered down at the misty morning.

"I love these valleys," Drake said, apparently feeling her gaze. "So many memories. So many relationships. Years upon years. Lifetimes upon lifetimes. It is strange to ride through here unwelcomed. I wonder if I will ever behold my homeland again."

"It's beautiful," Rachel said. "This is my favorite place in Lyrian."

"I have a cottage deeper in these mountains," Drake said. "Built it myself. I lived there for more than two lifetimes. Not short, reckless lifetimes like at Harthenham. Long ones. Good ones. I had my own valley. Not very big, but much more than I needed. To my knowledge, nobody else has ever found it. There is no easy way to get there. Winters were long. I needed to hoard plenty of wood and food."

"Did you get lonely?" Rachel asked.

"Not for a long time. I grew old alone twice—older than I reached during any other lifetimes. I had patience. I really felt the difference after each rebirth. By the third lifetime, I finally began to itch for something else, so I left. Many of my people depart on their own like that. Some never return. These mountains go on and on, nearly spanning the continent. There are plenty of places to hide away. We've lost some of our best men and women to solitary living. Maybe they're the smart ones."

"Is that what you want to do?" Rachel asked.

He shook his head. "Not now. If I had no responsibilities, possibly. It might enable me to repair my spirit, purge Harthenham from my psyche. But I intend to see this rebellion through. So long as you, Jason, and Galloran stand, I'll stand with you." He took a deep breath, looking around and rubbing the back of his neck. "My people despise me. My lives have run out. I don't belong here anymore. I have no future here. But it still hurts to leave. I miss these vales. I would have liked to see my cottage one last time."

"You still might," Rachel said.

"It's nowhere near our path."

"I mean afterward."

He squinted at her. "A whole lot needs to happen between now and then. Including an improbable amount of me not dying. I thought I'd bid these valleys farewell once before. I'd rather say good-bye again, then let it be a welcome surprise if I get to return."

Rachel thought about her home. Was she crazy to believe she would make it back there? She had to see her parents again. She couldn't lose faith, whether or not Drake thought their future looked bleak. "Hope isn't bad."

"Depends on the person," Drake replied. "If it works for you, use it. Ready?"

With a brief Edomic phrase, Rachel told her horse to head back to camp. Drake used heels and reins to similarly encourage his mount. She urged the mare to run, and enjoyed the cool wind in her face.

Back at camp, everyone was prepping to hike into the mountains. They all wore the robes of the Amar Kabal and carried heavy winter traveling cloaks. They expected to forage most of their food, but several people still carried packs loaded with nonperishable rations.

Besides Farfalee, five other seed people had joined the delegation. One was a young woman, Delissa, who stood half a head shorter than Farfalee and seldom spoke. The four other men included Nollin, the nephew of Naman, who bore an unmistakable resemblance to his uncle and had served for several lifetimes as his chief advisor. Farfalee had quietly informed Rachel that Nollin was along to help assure that even the most cynical seedfolk would believe the report sent from Mianamon. The other seedmen were named Kerick, Halco, and Andrus, all three reputedly proven warriors and huntsmen.

Galloran no longer accompanied them. He, Dorsio, and their accompanying seedmen had bid the delegation farewell at Roundvale, on their way to East Gate and eventually to Felrook.

"How was the joy ride?" Jason asked as Rachel dismounted.

"There's a beautiful view of Roundvale from here. The valley looked full of whipped cream."

"It's probably better that I didn't look. Chilled berries in cream was my favorite dish here. I already miss it."

"Looks like we're almost ready to go?"

Jason nodded. "Are you going to tell your horse to meet us at the tundra?"

"That might not be very kind," Rachel said, even though she knew he was kidding. "I bet she'd try. She's earned a break in a safe place."

"Too bad we can't say the same," Jason sighed.

Not far from Rachel, Drake was transferring gear from his horse into a backpack. Nollin sauntered over to him, a tall walking stick in hand. “Well-timed arrival,” Nollin congratulated. “You managed to skip all of the work.”

“I figured you could use the practice,” Drake said without looking at him. “It takes more skills than speechwriting to survive in the backcountry.”

Nollin’s nostrils flared. “I suppose I have much to learn. Perhaps you can instruct me how to secure food and drink by bowing to Maldor?”

Drake straightened, his expression relaxed. “Based on your politics, I assumed he was already paying you handsomely.”

Nollin glanced sideways and noticed Rachel and Jason watching. “There is a significant difference between recommending defensive strategies to protect your people and betraying them by kneeling to the emperor.”

Drake nodded. “You have a point. I was only killing myself.”

“Seedmen have long been recognized as incorruptible,” Nollin said. “We are unerringly true to ourselves and our people. No seedman in history ever openly accepted a bribe from the enemy. You tarnished the unblemished reputation of —”

“I wearied of fighting the emperor without the support of my countrymen,” Drake shot back, finally losing his temper. The heated discussion was beginning to draw the attention of others in the camp. “How many manglers have you slain? How many conscriptors? How many displacers? I was invited to Harthenham for a reason. Believe me, our reputation was destroyed long before I dined there. You haven’t been abroad in decades. We’re known across the continent as the cravens cowering in the mountains.”

“The rest of Lyrian suffers while we prosper,” Nollin said defensively. “Let them mock. Soon there won’t be any scoffers left.”

Drake shook his head. “The servants of the emperor scoff the loudest, and with the least fear of reprisal. Make no mistake. Under the policies you’ve supported, they’ll have the last laugh.”

“Prudence is not cowardice. If we had declared war against Felrook, we would no longer exist!”

“It’s only a benefit to have a long life if it’s worth living! If we insist on survival, we could always try winning.”

“This from the one seedman who ever surrendered!” Nollin laughed. “The only one who sold his honor to live at Harthenham.”

“Who has less virtue—the man who fought until the lack of support killed his spirit or the man who never fought?”



“You’re very noble,” Nollin mocked. “I’ll admit, while you fought, I gave you no support. You had one thing right when you went to Harthenham—nobody is going to stop the emperor! The rest of Lyrian lost the war long ago. The war has been over for years.”

“Then why are you here?” Drake growled.

“I’m here to assure an honest report reaches the Conclave. I’m here to watch the oracle confirm what those of us who haven’t spent the last thirty years in a stupor already know. There is no hope for a rebellion. Brave words can’t change that. Neither can bold actions. Neither can Beyonders or orantium or throneless kings with inflated reputations. This journey will only be worth the trouble in order to finally have the matter settled.”

“Don’t disrespect better men than you,” Drake warned.

“Why not?” Nollin replied. “You do it all the time.”

Drake reached for his sword.

“Stop!” Farfalee commanded. “This discussion has limped forward long enough.”

Drake left his sword sheathed. Nollin smirked at him. By now the entire delegation had become engrossed by the argument.

“Yes, we have different viewpoints represented among us,” she continued. “Yes, we have a displacer in our number, and a half giant, and a seedman who publically disgraced us.”

“She’s talking about you,” Drake muttered to Nollin, loud enough to draw a laugh.

“No, Drake, I’m talking about you,” Farfalee corrected. “Nollin’s views are shared by many of our people. Nollin never accepted a bribe from Maldor to hide from his problems in a debasing frenzy of self-indulgence.”

“It didn’t work,” Drake said. “The hiding, I mean.”

“If you speak again, we will leave you behind,” Farfalee threatened.

Drake raised both palms in surrender.

Farfalee smoothed her hands down across her robes. “As I was saying, our delegation represents diverse viewpoints. Some of us have reason to dislike or mistrust one another. But we are all united by a common goal: we want to know what the Prophetess of Mianamon can predict about the outcome of a rebellion. It does no good to speculate about what she will foresee. I think Nollin and Drake have already debated the possibilities enough for the entire trip. I move we don’t discuss the matter again.”

“Seconded,” Kerick said.

“Any opposed?” Farfalee asked, her intense eyes daring anyone to speak up. Nobody did. “Fair enough. Does any member of this group have a problem with the presence of any other member? Be honest. Speak now, or keep silent hereafter.”

“Aram snores,” Ferrin said.

Several people, including Rachel, strained to resist laughter.

Farfalee looked exasperated. “Does this seem like a useful time for humor?”

“I’m not joking,” Ferrin deadpanned. “It sounds like a bear drowning in a tar pit.”

Bursts of laughter escaped several people, including Rachel. Aram really did snore.

“I take no pleasure in traveling with a displacer,” Delissa said. The mood suddenly became much more sober. A couple of the other seedmen murmured agreement.

“Galloran entrusted Nedwin with the piece of my neck,” Ferrin assured her. “He can slay me at will.”

“I just hope it won’t be too late,” Nollin muttered.

Ferrin folded his arms. “Just as Drake can do little about the cowardly reputation of his people, I can’t do much about the untrustworthy reputation of mine.”

The statement elicited an outburst from the seedmen. Drake stared at the ground, lips trembling as he resisted laughter.

“Stop!” Farfalee demanded.

“The displacer isn’t wrong,” Tark said. “The reputation of the Amar Kabal has fallen.”

“Very well,” Andrus said, drawing his sword. “He’s welcome to test himself against me.”

“You’re missing the point,” Ferrin said calmly. “Nobody questions that you’re fine warriors. In fact, your prowess only makes you appear more cowardly. No one blames a weakling for hiding from a fight.”

“You claim to be tarnished by the reputation of your people,” Andrus said, sheathing his blade. “We have scouts, Ferrin. We know about you personally. You’re as slippery as any displacer serving the emperor.”

“Then your scouts should also know I have irrevocably fallen out of favor with the emperor,” Ferrin replied. “I may have been slippery, but until he turned on me, I was always loyal to him. I am now loyal to Jason and Galloran. I have proven that loyalty in every way possible, and will continue to do so. You will

likely need my help as we approach the eastern battlefront. There will be considerable imperial traffic to navigate.”

“I do not ask any of us to fully trust the displacer,” Farfalee said. “But I do ask whether any among us cannot abide his company. If so, speak now, so we may replace you.”

“Replace us?” Delissa complained. “For a displacer?”

“For a member of the delegation approved by the Conclave,” Farfalee rephrased. “If he were not willing to work with us, he would be left behind. But he appears willing.”

“We’re willing too,” Andrus said.

“Delissa?” Farfalee asked.

“I won’t make trouble,” she pledged.

“This is no casual exercise,” Farfalee said. “We’re about to pass the point of no return. This delegation must be united. A difficult road awaits us. We can’t afford internal strife.”

“May I speak now?” Drake asked, raising a finger.

“I suppose you’ll have to resume at some point,” Farfalee said.

“Who made you the leader?”

Her jaw tightened. “Take your pick: experience, competence, intelligence, charisma—”

“Also the Conclave agreed to it with Galloran,” Kerick interceded.

“Very well,” Drake said, clearing his throat theatrically. “Now that we have all of this settled, I move, less talking, more walking.”

“Seconded,” Nedwin said tiredly.

The motion passed unanimously.

# HOWLING NOTCH

The days began to blur as Jason marched northward into the soaring mountains. At first he had frequently paused to admire the jaw-dropping vistas of rugged cliffs, glittering cascades, chiseled ridgelines, hidden lakes, and craggy peaks. Although he lived in the Rockies and had visited several national parks, he had never witnessed such consistently grand, dramatic terrain.

But eventually the postcard panoramas became so commonplace that he began to lose the ability to view them with fresh eyes. Instead of basking in the beauty, he started to focus on how steep the trail was to the next rise, or how closely the narrow path ran along the brink of the cliff ahead, or how far the way had to twist and wind to cross a relatively short distance.

There seemed to be no end to the mountains. No matter how high they climbed, when peering ahead or back or off to either side, only more rocky slopes and stony crests remained in view, rank upon rank, a granitic ocean sculpted over eons.

The way became more challenging the deeper they progressed into the maze of canyons and summits. More often the trail became a ledge with a sheer drop on one hand and a steep rise on the other. More often, dizzying crevices were spanned by wobbly rope bridges. More often, carved tunnels or natural caves granted access through otherwise impassible terrain.

Although the sky remained mostly clear, the thinning air gained a chilly bite. Heavy winter cloaks were worn with increasing regularity. Snowy glaciers appeared upon the highest peaks and saddles.

They ate well. Aram reveled in the elk meat prevalent early on the hike, and later in the goat meat featured at the higher altitudes. Jason spotted all sorts of life, especially birds of prey, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and an unfamiliar breed of shaggy, hopping rodent.

Drake and Nedwin helped scout, but Ferrin invariably remained with the main group. Farfalee and Nollin seldom ranged far ahead or behind, but the

other seedfolk spent much of the time away from the delegation, either to hunt or keep watch for trouble.

The demanding trail offered little chance for conversation. Words tended to be limited to instructions about avoiding danger along the treacherous route. They hiked long hours, eating hastily and sleeping greedily. Jason was glad the Amar Kabal required no real sleep, because he never had to stand guard.

Jason had overheard no harsh words since Farfalee had called for cooperation at the trailhead, but he had observed plenty of surly glances.

On the ninth day of their hike, they reached a large stone building at the brink of a yawning chasm. With irregular walls and steep angles to the slate-shingled roof, the weatherworn structure could almost have passed for a natural outgrowth of the mountainside. Three thick ropes curved across the chasm, the thickest for walking on and the other two for handrails, all three connected at intervals by slender lines.

Four seed people manned the remote outpost—two men and two women. The building contained a stockpile of edibles and other goods, along with enough space for the entire delegation to sleep indoors, warmed by a blazing fire.

Farfalee counseled with the head of the outpost, a deep-voiced man named Valero. Jason overheard snatches of advice about weather and cave sloths and news from even more remote watch points.

As they prepared to depart the next morning, Jason found Ferrin reclining in an isolated storeroom, munching on dried fruit. He had specifically sought him out because the displacer hadn't seemed like himself since the trip began.

"You doing all right?" Jason asked directly.

"Never better," Ferrin said, popping what might have been a shriveled apricot into his mouth.

"You haven't joined any of the scouting missions," Jason said.

Ferrin grinned faintly. "I have a keen sense for when my services are unappreciated."

"You have as much right to be here as anyone," Jason assured him.

"In theory, perhaps, thanks to Galloran. Not in practice. Don't fret for me. I'm right at home when most of the people around me wish I were elsewhere. Even among imperial servants, the company of a displacer is undesired."

Jason frowned. "Don't let the seedmen get to you."

"It isn't just the seedmen," Ferrin said without evident resentment. "The rest of you don't trust me to varying degrees. I don't expect Nedwin or Tark would put a hand out to steady me if I teetered on a brink. Drake and Aram could take

me or leave me. Corinne is too innocent to know better. And of course you and Rachel are nursing old wounds. I'm accustomed to this kind of atmosphere. Right now it's time for me to lie low. If I appear happy or helpful, it will only cause irritation and heighten the tension. An unwelcome guest should avoid flaunting his presence."

"I'm trusting you more and more," Jason said, feeling bad for him.

"Which feels much stranger than suspicion," Ferrin said. "When you were new to Lyrian, before you knew anything about displacers, I could rationalize your acceptance as ignorance. I've never had a true friend, Jason. I've used others. I've been used. But a principled person has never knowingly accepted me. When Galloran stood up for me in front of the Conclave? When he vouched for me? That was a new experience. I almost stood and objected."

"Why?" Jason said. "Was he wrong?"

Ferrin compressed his lips. "I want him to be right," he finally said. "Displacers are raised to spy for Maldor. I was taught to scheme since the cradle. I've always had a knack for it. I can't stop noticing how I might take advantage of information. How I might exploit relationships. Among displacers, I took pride in having more honor than most. I often passed up unwholesome opportunities. But next to integrity like I've seen in you and Galloran, I'm entirely unworthy."

"People can change," Jason said.

"I'm trying, Jason. But don't you see? About as honest as I can get is confessing how dishonest I instinctively want to be!"

"That's a start," Jason said. He regarded Ferrin soberly. "What do you feel tempted to do?"

Ferrin stared at the floor. "Part of me muses how difficult it would be for the seedmen to pass judgment on me and my people if they were extinct. Part of me wants to exploit a million flaws I've noticed in their attitudes and defenses. Part of me wants to show you and Galloran that you were fools to trust me, that I don't need your sympathy or protection. Part of me wants that piece of my neck back from Nedwin."

Jason didn't like where this was heading. Had he worried that Ferrin might somehow betray them? Sure. But it was different to hear those words from his lips. Then again, he was just trying to be honest, right?

"You don't know how to respond," Ferrin said. "I'll make it easy. The safest course of action for your young rebellion would be to toss me off the tallest cliff you can find. I have played a perilous game for years—trading secrets, telling

lies, finding leverage, earning trust only to betray it. I got away with an eccentric lifestyle among Maldor's elite by hiding much of what I learned and proving myself too valuable to kill. It was a precarious, unforgiving game. When I released you from Felrook, I miscalculated, and I lost. Game over. Bridges burned. But the game is part of my nature. I don't think I can stop playing until I stop breathing."

"You want us to kill you?" Jason said, unconvinced.

Ferrin snickered miserably. "I don't know. Part of me suspects you'd never do that. Part of me thinks my candor will only make you trust me more. Maybe part of me is nobly trying to warn you. Maybe part of me doesn't care anymore. I'm an actor. I've pretended to be too many things to too many people. Cut free from Maldor, having betrayed the only cause I had always upheld, I'm not sure I have an identity."

"Start fresh," Jason urged. "Be true to this. Play your games for us."

Ferrin sighed. "I never chose this cause. Not really. I didn't walk away from Maldor as a matter of principle. I made a mistake and ran away. Am I so inconstant that I then become unswervingly loyal to his enemies?"

"Why were you loyal to him?" Jason asked.

"Partly out of tradition," Ferrin said. "I'm a displacer. All displacers are loyal to Maldor. Mostly for security. He's going to win. Displacers know what happens to the losing side. I was loyal to the future undisputed emperor of all Lyrian."

"What if we can win?" Jason said. "What if the oracle sees a way that Maldor can lose?"

"Oracles see thousands of possible futures," Ferrin said. "Maybe millions. Maybe more. Out of the countless possible futures, is there one where Maldor fails? Probably. Even if this oracle predicts possible victory for a rebellion, I'm willing to wager she'll see many, many more futures where we get crushed. Besides, if that oracle lays eyes on me, she'll probably order me slain on sight."

"Why?" Jason asked.

Ferrin met his gaze. "Because who knows how many of those futures where the rebellion gets crushed will begin with an act of betrayal by me?"

Jason had no words. Ferrin didn't help him. "Should you ask to be imprisoned?"

"What do you think?" Ferrin asked.

"I already told you. I think you should start fresh. I think you should call your old life over. This is a better cause. You said you never had real friends. You're on your way now. I'm one of them. Let that be enough."

Ferrin flicked a piece of fruit into his mouth with his thumb. "I don't know. I think if you lie long enough, often enough, you become a lie. Strip away my pretenses and deceptions, and I'm not sure there'd be anything left."

"You won't fix that problem with more lies," Jason said. "Not by lying to yourself. Not by lying to us. If you're true to this cause, you'll have something left when you strip away the rest—this cause and these friendships."

"You don't get it," Ferrin said. "No matter how hard I try, there's a cynical corner of my mind where everything is an act. People are game pieces. Information is currency. At the same time I portray myself as a rebel displacer loyal to a new cause, I secretly feel like a deeply placed spy worming his way deeper all the time. I've mustered sincerity before. I've almost believed it. I'm an expert at almost believing my lies. How is this different? How can it be?"

"Because we know what you are and we're still giving you a chance."

Ferrin bowed his head. He reached one hand up the sleeve of his robe and withdrew a chunk of flesh.

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"Part of my brachial artery," Ferrin said. "Take it. Consider it an extra fail-safe. I've spent my life backstabbing anyone foolish enough to trust me. Now I'm betraying the one master I've always served. And I'm betraying my people. But I'll try to be true to this rebellion. For the sake of friendship. It's a better reason than I've had before."

Jason accepted it with a nod.

Footsteps approached. Drake poked his head into the storeroom. "We're getting ready to move out. Is that dried fruit?"

"They have mountains of it," Ferrin said.

"Bring me a handful," Drake said. He looked back and forth between Jason and Ferrin. "Everything all right?"

"Just peachy," Jason said.

Crossing the three ropes over the chasm was no fun. They jiggled and swayed far more than Jason preferred, and it seemed impossible to avoid looking down at the seemingly infinite fall awaiting him.

Drake explained that these makeshift bridges were easily destroyed, leaving the trail virtually impassable if even lightly defended. The delegation traversed several more of them as the trail zigzagged northeast toward the unseen tundra.

By the twelfth day of the trek, still surrounded by colossal crags and escarpments, Jason began to notice the wind keening ominously in the distance.



“We might have some bad weather coming,” he commented to Farfalee as they gathered around a campfire below a sheltering overhang.

“Not necessarily,” she replied. “You hear Howling Notch. We’ll get there tomorrow.”

“That’s where the fun really begins,” Drake said, munching on a strip of dried meat.

“What’s Howling Notch?” Rachel asked.

“An unnatural anomaly,” Drake said.

“The terrain north of Howling Notch funnels high winds through a narrow gap,” Farfalee explained.

Drake prodded the fire with a stick. “The wind is constant and fierce, yet the terrain never changes, the gap never erodes.”

“A secretive wizard once made his home in the vicinity,” Farfalee added. “He built his stronghold into the living rock, shaping it with Edomic. Many believe the terrain around Howling Notch is under some lingering enchantment.”

“I’ve been through the notch a time or three,” Kerick said, stepping up to the fire. “It’s demanding, but if you keep your head, it can be done.”

The prospect of high winds and steep cliffs made Jason recall a certain nightmare with a torivor involved. “Can we blow off an edge?”

Kerick chuckled knowingly. “It’s the deadliest stretch of this trail. In stormy weather, no living thing could drag itself through that gap. We’re later in the year than I’d prefer, but the summer weather keeps holding. If you hold tight to the line and follow instructions, we should get you through.”

The next morning the wailing wind grew progressively louder. The tempestuous howls seemed incongruent with the blue sky and wispy clouds overhead.

“You’d think we were hiking into a hurricane,” Rachel said from behind Jason.

“It’s weird,” he replied. “I’ve hardly felt a breeze all morning.”

Walking in front of Jason, Drake glanced back. “The same terrain that funnels the gusts through Howling Notch mostly shields the approach. You’ll see it just up around this bend.”

When Howling Notch came into view, Jason stopped walking. Still some distance ahead, a high saddle of rock connected a pair of towering escarpments. A steep, V-shaped gap split the saddle.

“It’s so loud even from here!” Rachel said. Jason could hardly make out her words.

The trail approaching the notch was a narrow ledge chiseled into the mountainside. Jason had begun adapting to the constant threat of falling a thousand feet to his death, but this scant trail was the narrowest they had encountered. No matter how carefully he positioned himself, his feet were never more than six inches from the edge.

Fortunately, a rope ran along the wall of the ledge, staked in place. Without something to hold, Jason wondered if he could have forced himself to proceed. Even with the rope, he tried to focus on Drake's back and ignore the dizzying drop. The wind roared constantly, occasionally falling to a moan or rising to a piercing shriek so intense that Jason could hardly believe he still felt no significant stirring of the air.

The closer they got to Howling Notch, the less Jason could see of it. The trail climbed diagonally from below and to one side. At last the narrow ledge widened into a semicircular shelf spacious enough for the entire group to assemble. Farfalee shouted to be heard over the deafening gale.

"We'll cross through the notch in two groups of five and one of four. Kerick will lead the first group, Halco the next, and Andrus the last. Listen carefully to their instructions." Kerick and Halco each tapped four other members of the delegation. Andrus claimed the remainders. Jason ended up in Halco's group, along with Delissa, Nedwin, and Aram. They huddled together apart from the others.

Halco had spent most of his time away from the delegation, scouting and hunting. Jason had never really conversed with him.

"Three rules," Halco said. "First, hold on to the line. The line will guide us through. Always have a firm grip with at least one hand. You never know when the wind will surge. Second, stay low. If the wind grabs you, it will be a very long time before you hit the ground. It can happen very suddenly. We move through the notch hugging the ground—slithering, not crawling. We don't want to present anything for the wind to seize. Third, move when I move, pause when I pause. We won't be able to hear one another. If somebody gets torn from the line, you can't help them. Raise your head, reach for them, rise up even a little, and you'll join them. Any questions?"

"Can we do this after the sun goes down?" Aram asked.

Halco shook his head. "Your smaller size will probably serve you better than greater strength. Less surface area. Nobody outmuscles the wind in Howling Notch. Besides, the wind tends to blow harder after dusk. Anything else?"

"What order?" Nedwin asked.

“I’ll lead, then Jason, you, Aram, and Delissa. Once we’re through the notch, the line will guide us to a trench. Only by keeping low in the trench will we be able to descend the far side.” He held up little cylinders of cork. “We’ll all want these for our ears.”

Jason accepted a pair of earplugs and inserted them. Rachel was part of the first group, led by Kerick. After adjusting his pack and his robes, Kerick guided his group beyond the sheltered shelf and out of sight. Jason and the others sat down to wait.

Even with the earplugs, the wind remained plenty noisy. Jason listened to it rise and fall, imagining how it must be whipping at Rachel. Tense with anticipation, it was hard for him to tell whether time was passing slowly or quickly. He could have waited on the shelf all day without growing bored.

Off to one side, Corinne put a hand on Farfalee’s shoulder and spoke to her. Farfalee made a motion to Halco, who stood and gestured for his group to rise.

Corinne came over to Jason, and he pulled out an earplug. “The first group made it,” she reported. “Rachel says it’s worse than we could guess.”

“Comforting,” Jason replied. “See you on the other side.” He replaced his earplug and got into position behind Halco. The seedman led him away from the shelf along a narrow ledge.

They progressed another couple of hundred yards, sheltered from the wind by the wall of rock beside the trail. The wall shrank until it finally ended. Just beyond the end of the wall, a guideline was staked into the gray rock of the ground, proceeding up to the notch.

Halco looked back at the others, holding up his forefinger. The wind screamed unnervingly. Finally, the howl diminished to a strong moan. Flat on his belly, Halco took hold of the line and wormed beyond the sheltering barricade.

Jason followed. Even at a low moan, he could not believe how forcefully the wind washed over him. Air had never felt so tangible. If he had tried to stand, no amount of strength could have kept his hands on the guideline. It felt like he was trying to drag himself upstream through a raging river.

The ground rose at an incline to the notch, overlapping sheets of stone textured by grooves, lumps, and other irregularities. Pulling himself over the sharp-edged terrain was uncomfortable, but Jason figured the jagged unevenness might serve to help disrupt the wind a little if he stayed low. Twenty yards behind him, the incline ended at the brink of a lofty precipice. The cold air smelled like iron, stone, and snow.

The moan rose to a roar. The wind slicing by overhead seemed to have weight, pressing him down. If he raised a finger, he could picture the slipstream tearing it off.

Jason kept moving forward hand over hand. Even below the worst of the wind, and with Halco in front of him bearing the brunt of the gale, it took all of his strength and concentration. Keeping his eyes down, Jason tried to press himself into the mountain.

The wind gusted to an earsplitting shriek, and his head bumped against Halco's moccasins. Jason halted, clinging to the line. The shriek remained steady until long after an opera singer would have passed out. As the scream diminished to a roar, Jason glimpsed Halco squirming forward again.

Foot by foot, inch by inch, Jason gained ground. At intervals he passed the stakes that kept the guideline anchored. He expected he would have bruises all over tomorrow, not from impact, but from merciless pressure on various points of his anatomy, especially his elbows.

Finally they reached the front of the notch. Halco paused. The wind roared like never before. Without earplugs the volume might have done permanent damage. The muscles in Jason's hands and arms burned with exertion. After what felt like forever, the wind ebbed a little, and Halco scrambled hastily forward.

The narrow notch ran straight for about ten yards before it started to widen. Jason felt relief as he slithered across the highest point of the saddle, the ground scraping his face as he tried to keep low. Descending the far side, he peeked ahead at where the guideline vanished into a trench. Twenty more yards.

He heard the wind increase in force before he felt it. Halco froze, flattening himself. The wind rose to a shriek, then to a penetrating whine, like a jet engine. Jason gripped the rope with all of his might. He could feel the guideline shuddering. No matter how low he remained, the blasting air seemed on the verge of taking hold of him. Several times his rope jerked so hard that part of his body left the ground slightly before slamming back down. These new bruises would be from impact. The wind was unbelievable. This was how it would feel to water-ski behind a missile. How fast was the wind going? It had to be hundreds of miles per hour.

Jason glimpsed Halco, still flat, gazing backward, eyes wide. Turning his head slightly, keeping his cheek to the ground, Jason looked back as well. Nedwin clung to the rope behind him, head down. Then Aram. Delissa trailed them,

just coming over the highest part of the saddle. Her body looked like a flag in a tornado. Suddenly Jason understood why the rope had twitched so much.

As Jason watched, the relentless wind gusted even harder, and she lost her grip. It looked like Delissa had been shot from a cannon. Her body clipped the side of the notch, setting her spinning as the gale rocketed her away. Despite the low angle of Jason's viewpoint, she stayed within sight for a very long time, shrinking with distance until she dropped out of view.

Horrified, Jason bowed his head, squashing his face against the ground. Closing his eyes, forearms burning, he squeezed the guideline harder than ever. Surely the wind would slacken any moment. If anything, it rose a bit more. Any moment. Any moment.

At last the wind ebbed, becoming a scream, then a roar. Peeking ahead, Jason saw Halco advancing. Jason hurried forward in his wake, not wanting to lose the seedman as a partial windbreak.

The notch widened. Glancing ahead, Jason saw the entire valley spreading outward from the gap, a giant funnel, just as some of the others had described.

The wind weakened even more. Jason kept moving forward until hands helped him down into a deeply cut trench, so perfectly square that it must have been carved by tools. The wind remained noisy, but he no longer felt it. Nedwin dropped in behind him, then Aram.

Jason slouched against the wall, numb and exhausted after the ordeal. Had he really just seen a woman launched into the air, like a blade of grass dropped on the stream of a fire hose? Hitting the side of the notch could have killed her. If not, the fall would definitely have finished the job. He consoled himself that at least she had an amar. Then again, this was rocky country. Would it ever get planted?

Kerick and Halco yelled at each other, trying to be heard. Kerick hurried off down the trench in a crouch, and Jason saw him hollering to Rachel. Time passed. Jason could barely believe he was alive. Rachel had been right. Even with all of the warnings, that had been much worse than he had guessed.

Eventually Farfalee dropped into the trench, followed by Corinne and Drake. Where was Andrus?

Jason had to wait for an explanation. They spent the next hour moving along trenches. On this side of the notch, the wind was much more widespread. The farther they traveled from the notch, the less concentrated the gale became, but even after an hour, the wind still seemed to gust like a hurricane.

The trench eventually led to a cave. Once they were inside, the air seemed eerily still. After they'd advanced for some time, it even began to get quiet. In a tall chamber with undulant flowstone walls and stalactites dripping on stalagmites, Jason removed his earplugs to hear the others.

"Andrus went after Delissa," Farfalee explained. "He didn't want to risk her seed getting stranded on barren rock. Nobody travels the canyon below the notch."

"It will be a tricky climb," Nollin said.

"He's the best climber we have," Kerick said.

"Andrus relayed that if he can find her amar swiftly, he'll try to catch up," Farfalee said.

"Unlikely," Halco grunted. "He'll have to descend thousands of feet. Then find the seed. Then climb back up. It will take days."

"He may kill himself trying," Kerick said. "Either way, rejoining us is wishful thinking."

"Andrus will survive," Halco said. "He'll find her amar. But I agree that he won't be back."

"A foul loss," Nollin uttered bleakly. "Delissa was perhaps the best archer in the Seven Vales. And few swordsmen could outperform Andrus."

"No matter the precautions taken, surviving Howling Notch always involves some luck," Halco said. "Delissa did nothing wrong. She was simply in the wrong place when the wind became most fierce. We're fortunate more of us didn't fly free. It was the harshest crossing I've experienced."

"We can only continue," Farfalee said. "We knew Howling Notch would be our biggest test in the mountains. We're almost through to the tundra. The rest of the way is mostly downhill."

"Straight to the Forsaken Kingdom," Drake muttered. "Delissa and Andrus may be the lucky ones."

# THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

*Will this tundra ever end?* Rachel thought to Corinne.

*It's lovely,* Corinne replied. *I like the foxes. And the birds. And the lack of cliffs.*

*You need to stop being so positive,* Rachel scolded. *You're totally unrelatable. You're going to alienate everyone.*

*I'm not sure anything I do will make me relatable,* Corinne conveyed. *I grew up in a tree deep inside of a deadly swamp. I'm an exiled princess. And I talk more with my mind than my mouth.*

*All the more reason to act grumpier,* Rachel affirmed.

*The ground here gets too muddy in some places,* Corinne complained tentatively.

*Very good,* Rachel encouraged. *That's a start.*

*I can't say I'm fond of the caribou droppings,* she added.

*Who can? Very relatable. And you're right about the foxes. They couldn't be cuter. At least when they're not chewing on carcasses.*

Rachel currently walked at the rear of the delegation, near Farfalee. Corinne was toward the front, closer to Jason. Yet they heard each other perfectly. Their mental link had been very useful back at Howling Notch. They had experimented, and the telepathy worked just fine with hundreds of yards between them. Half a mile apart required a lot of focus. Around a mile apart the communication became too faint to comprehend, like the fading memories of an elusive dream.

From behind, Rachel watched Jason hiking beside Corinne. They leaned together, sharing a laugh. Since reaching the tundra, Jason had made a noticeable effort to hang around her. The flat terrain enabled more socializing than the lofty passes. Rachel supposed it was natural. Not only was Corinne older than him and a total knockout, she also had an innocent sweetness that made her accessible. Rachel plucked a leaf from a shrub and tore it as she walked. Had Jason ever tried this conspicuously to earn her attention? Or was it only conspicuous to her? Why did she bother noticing?

Off to her right loomed the omnipresent mountains, an unbroken chain reaching from horizon to horizon. To the east, west, and north sprawled open tundra, grassy country contoured by hillocks, boulders, tussocks, and low ridges. In the wide-open terrain, almost everyone took turns scouting. As she watched, a twitchy rabbit darted from the shelter of one scraggly bush to another.

*We might miss the monotonous tundra when we reach the Forsaken Kingdom,* Corinne conveyed.

*Nobody seems to know many details about it,* Rachel replied.

*Ferrin knew more than the Amar Kabal,* Corinne agreed. *At least he had heard rumors that the disease was transmitted by worms.*

*Ew, I just stepped in a squishy spot,* Rachel complained. *You really feel it in these moccasin boots.*

*Be glad it's summer,* Corinne replied. *Kerick said this whole area is under ice and snow for most of the year.*

*We have land like this not too far from where I lived back home.*

*You lived in an icy place?*

*Sometimes. Washington was more rainy than snowy. Huge trees, lots of moss.*

*That I can imagine,* Corinne assured her.

*I bet. But not too far north from my home there were reindeer and tundra.*

*Do you think we'll be attacked by the walking dead?*

Rachel had been trying to avoid dwelling on it. She considered the question. *We should definitely expect trouble. There has to be a reason nobody goes there. Farfalee told me a small river forms the unofficial northern border of the kingdom, and they've never seen the walking dead on this side of it. We shouldn't have to worry until then.*

*How do you kill something that's already dead?*

*Nobody knows enough about them. Ask Jason. He'll have an opinion.*

*Wait a moment.* Rachel could see Corinne talking to Jason, but they were too far ahead to hear. *He says you chop them up into little pieces.*

*But what if that infects you with the disease?*

Jason leaned close to answer Corinne quietly. She laughed. *You let Nollin do it.*

Ferrin and Nedwin were the first to spot a walking corpse. Ever since they'd lost Andrus and Delissa, Ferrin had contributed more with the scouting. A few hours after the group had forded the Agwam River, Ferrin and Nedwin returned to the delegation and reported a lone woman limping their way from the south. Rachel



had felt uncomfortably alert since crossing the northern boundary of the Forsaken Kingdom. In a way, it was a relief to end the anticipation. Based on the description, the undead woman did not sound like a major threat.

“We should study her,” Drake recommended. “Approach her and see if she can listen to reason.”

“And when she attacks?” Ferrin asked.

“We see how hard she is to take down,” Drake replied. “The information could become extremely relevant.”

“The corpse is coming directly toward us?” Farfalee asked.

“She can obviously sense our presence,” Nedwin affirmed. “Despite her injured leg, she’s hurrying along a perfect line to intercept us.”

“He’s right,” Ferrin agreed.

Kerick folded his arms. “If we’ll have to face her sooner or later, might be best to get it over with, confront the abomination on our terms.”

“We must neutralize her from a distance,” Halco said. “No close combat.”

“That still may not sufficiently protect us,” Nollin cautioned. He turned to Ferrin. “How certain are you that the disease is transmitted by worms?”

“I heard a rumor. I’ve never personally been to the Forsaken Kingdom, but Maldor has long taken an interest in the plaguelands. He considers the plague the greatest potential threat to his domination of Lyrian. If it ever spread, the disease could destroy all of the kingdoms on the continent, regardless of their power or politics. Research has been quietly conducted. The rumor is probably credible.”

Nollin folded his arms. “Setting aside opinions about rumors, what I hear is that we lack certainty on the matter. This sickness obliterated a mighty realm! We know the condition to be dreadfully contagious. Mere proximity to an afflicted person might spawn infection. For the sake of the mission, some of us should keep well back.”

“Like those of us without seeds,” Aram muttered.

“We’re unsure whether the amar will be immune to the malady,” Farfalee said.

“The amar could not regenerate an undead body,” Nollin asserted. “But the amar could be incapacitated by the disease. The safest course for an infected member of the Amar Kabal would be a quick death to reduce the risk of exposing the seed.”

“What if one of the rest of us becomes infected?” Corinne asked.

A troubled silence settled over the group. Farfalee spoke. “If the disease manifests, we would need to accept that the afflicted person had become a puppet controlled by an illness.”

“How will we know if we catch it?” Rachel asked. “Or if the disease has taken hold?”

“A sudden craving for blood and brains?” Jason guessed.

The joke fell flat, earning uneasy smiles instead of laughs.

“You may not be far from the truth,” Farfalee said. “I imagine some of the symptoms will be evident. We’ll need to remain vigilant—pay attention to how we’re feeling, keep a sharp eye on one another. Nollin is right that some of us should go to extreme lengths to keep our distance from the walking dead. That core group needs to include those whose presence we most need at Mianamon, namely Corinne, Rachel, Jason, and Nollin.”

“And you, Farfalee,” Nollin added.

“Halco and I will do everything in our power to keep the key members of the delegation uncompromised,” Kerick asserted.

“Any threat to Jason will have to pass through me first,” Tark vowed.

“I am under specific orders to protect Corinne and Rachel,” Nedwin said.

“I am here to do whatever is needed,” Drake pledged.

Farfalee glanced at her brother, a flash of pain and concern in her eyes. “Unwelcome as such a discussion may be, it does provide a practical hierarchy.”

“What of our bold displacer?” Nollin asked.

“He wants everyone to live,” Ferrin said tactfully. “Himself included.”

“Same with the smuggler,” Aram inserted.

“I believe we all understand what needs to happen,” Farfalee said. “Five of us have pledged to help ensure the survival of the others by any means necessary. But of course I want all of us to survive this passage through the Forsaken Kingdom. Aside from an examination of this diseased woman, our goal will be evasion. I agree that we need to investigate the effectiveness of projectiles against her. Hopefully, these unfortunate plague victims can be slain from a distance.”

Ferrin and Nedwin led the delegation to a hilltop that offered a view of the infected woman coming toward them. It was hard to apprehend details from a distance, but she was clearly limping. Her body was emaciated, her clothes tattered, her hair matted and filthy.

The rest of the delegation waited atop the hill while Kerick and Halco advanced fifty yards down the slope. Kerick carried a bow and Halco brought a

sling. As the disheveled woman drew nearer, her hasty limp became more frantic.

“Halt!” Kerick demanded in a clear voice. “We mean you no harm.”

The woman continued forward without a response.

Kerick set an arrow to his bowstring and pulled it to his cheek. “Halt or I will be forced to shoot. We only wish to converse.”

The woman rasped a moaning reply. Straining her ears and using some imagination, Rachel believed the woman might have said “need.” The woman shambled toward Kerick with desperate vigor.

Kerick put an arrow through her chest. The impact made her stumble; then she continued toward him, oblivious to the injury. Halco loosed a stone from his sling, which knocked her to the ground. Teeth bared angrily, the woman scrambled back to her feet.

“Please, halt,” Kerick demanded, retreating a few paces, his bow bent again.

She gave no response.

With rapid efficiency, Kerick began putting arrows through her head. By the third, she collapsed to the ground, finally immobile.

“Not promising,” Farfalee murmured. “At least enough arrows stopped her. The disease may control her, but it seems the commandeered body needs some brain function to stay in motion.”

“I have considerable experience handling dangerous and exotic substances,” Nedwin said. “Do you mind if I examine the corpse?”

“If you’re willing to risk the consequences,” Farfalee said.

Kerick and Halco withdrew from the fallen woman, and Nedwin approached gingerly, as if expecting that her unconsciousness might be a ruse. Eventually he crouched beside her and used a dagger to prod her in several places. With some effort, he extracted the arrows. After several minutes spent hunched over the inert form, Nedwin returned to the group.

“Worms,” Nedwin reported. “Small ones. Gray. Lots of them. No blood. Just skin, sinew, and bone. The worms were already at work repairing her injuries, knitting her flesh back together. They seemed too heavy to be transmitted through the air. I used my knife to dig out a worm. When I placed it on her arm, the little creature immediately burrowed below her skin.”

“It seems Ferrin provided accurate intelligence,” Farfalee said.

“The walking dead are vehicles governed by parasites,” Nollin said. “They aren’t people. We don’t need to show them any mercy.”

“If my corpse becomes animated by maggots,” Drake said, “please have mercy. Behead me. Burn me. Whatever it takes.”

“You didn’t even need to ask,” Halco assured him.

Rachel shivered. How would it feel to have worms tunnel into her body and assume command? How would she feel to see it happen to one of her companions? To Jason or Corinne? She might truly lose her mind.

Leaving the plague-savaged woman behind, the delegation marched southward. They passed a dilapidated village overgrown by shrubs and small trees, with most of the structures having collapsed into their foundations. Just after sunset, from a ridgetop, they glimpsed a distant city encompassed by a stone wall, its towers silent and dark in the twilight.

Kerick steered the group away from the quiet city. Rachel tried not to picture bloodthirsty zombies lurking behind those gloomy walls. She failed.

After some discussion, they made camp on high ground and lit a fire. Ferrin had insisted that the limping woman had been drawn to them by some instinct far more powerful than firelight, but hoped the flames might be used to intimidate attackers. Kerick had reasoned that while the high ground exposed them visually and allowed enemies to approach from all sides, it also enabled the group to see their enemies coming and to flee in any direction.

Rachel bedded down near Corinne and Jason. “Do you think we can outrun these things if they’re not limping?” Rachel wondered aloud.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Jason replied. “Let’s hope there’s a reason they’re not called the running dead.”

“What do you call the walking dead when you kill them?” Corinne asked.

“Morbid question,” Jason approved. “The walking deader? The no-longer-walking dead?”

“The resting dead,” Rachel said.

“Rachel wins,” Corinne decreed.

“I don’t like how that lady was coming straight at us,” Jason said. “Makes you wonder how many of them are out there right now, heading our way, walking, or limping, or dragging themselves over—”

“Enough,” Rachel said firmly. “I’m already going to have a lousy time sleeping.”

“Better to be prepared than surprised,” Jason said.

“Imagining zombies in the night doesn’t prepare us,” Rachel countered. “If we’re going to get attacked, better to rest than stay up worrying.”

As if in response to their conversation, a shape appeared out of the night at the edge of the firelight, making Rachel gasp until she recognized Nedwin. They hadn't seen him in hours. He came and crouched beside Jason.

"You were gone a while," Jason said.

"I don't like this place," Nedwin whispered. "I found some hoofprints. Feral pigs. Goats. Wild horses. I toured an abandoned town. There was evidence of other members of the walking dead. I expect we'll see trouble tonight."

Jason shot Rachel a significant look. "So what do we do?"

"Try to get some sleep," Nedwin said.

Rachel shot a look back at Jason.

"I better go report to Farfalee," Nedwin said.

"I'm not sure I can sleep," Corinne said. "I've never felt so nervous! Is it like this a lot?"

"This is extra bad," Jason said.

"Horror movie bad," Rachel agreed.

"Horror movie?" Corinne asked.

"Scary stories we have in the Beyond," Rachel clarified.

"With titles like *Attack of the Wormy Zombies*," Jason added. "They tend to be really bloody."

Eyes wide, Corinne sat rigidly. "How do they usually end?"

Jason and Rachel shared a knowing look.

The assault came in the deepest hours of the night. Kerick roused the group with a shouted warning. By the time Rachel was on her feet, she could hear the walking dead stumbling in the darkness. A muffled groan somewhere in the blackness made the hair on her arms stand up. Heart thudding, mind wishing she was dreaming, her first realization was that the attackers seemed to be closing in from all directions.

Clouds muted the moon and blocked much of the starlight, leaving Rachel squinting at vague shapes approaching up the hillside. Farfalee and Kerick began loosing arrows, and some of the shapes staggered. Nedwin appeared beside Rachel. "We're surrounded," he hissed, a dagger in each hand. "Stay near me."

Jason drew his sword. Tark stood at his side, a weighty knife in one hand, a torch in the other.

"Plan?" Drake asked.

"They're on all sides," Halco answered.

“We move as a group,” Farfalee said briskly. “Break through their ranks and try to outpace them.”

“Which way?” Ferrin asked.

“Hard to say,” Kerick responded, releasing another arrow. From multiple directions, infected corpses neared the perimeter of the firelight.

“That way,” Nedwin said firmly, extending an arm. “A bit steeper, but fewer enemies.”

A husky man with curly hair lumbered into the light, moving in an awkward jog and clutching a heavy stick. One of his eyes was rolled back, showing almost no iris, and he wore no shirt. A pair of arrows to the head dropped him.

Aram brandished his massive sword. “Follow me,” he boomed. “I’ll open a path.” Bearing a sword and a torch, Ferrin advanced beside the half giant in the direction Nedwin had indicated. The group formed up around Rachel, Corinne, and Jason, weapons ready, moving away from the campfire with hurried, shuffling paces. Vicious sweeps of Aram’s sword sent enemies sailing.

Glancing back, Rachel saw figures rushing forward from the far side of the campfire. Focusing on the logs, she uttered a command that sent them flying at the undead attackers amid a fiery spray of sparks and embers. The logs launched with terrific force, some of them shattering against bodies, and the assailants recoiled from the blaze with tucked heads and upraised hands.

The use of Edomic brought a euphoric rush utterly incongruent with the fear that had been squeezing Rachel’s heart. Suddenly she felt more alert and capable. The logs had taken flight with more force than she had expected, probably because the command had been energized by her panic.

“They don’t like fire,” Ferrin called, jabbing with his torch before slashing with his sword.

Aram clubbed a sinewy woman with the flat of his sword, the impact sending her into a clumsy cartwheel. Tark swung his torch to ward off an undead teen with a bony body. Kerick released more arrows.

“Faster!” Halco warned from the rear of the group. “They’re converging on us.”

Peeking over her shoulder, Rachel saw figures hurrying jerkily toward them from all sides of the hill, adjusting their pursuit with alarming coordination. The slope had become steep enough that Rachel was descending sideways with her knees bent, the soles of her moccasins sliding on the dirt.

“Run!” Farfalee ordered.

Aram bullied his way forward even faster, a human wrecking ball who left broken zombies cast aside like groaning heaps of litter. Rachel did not know what they would have done without him to lead the charge. She picked up the pace along with the rest of the group. By the faint moonlight and the unsteady glow of three torches, they raced down the slope, Aram slamming enemies aside with his sword, Ferrin and the others doing their best to cut down the leftovers. The incline helped Rachel reach such great speed that she doubted whether she could stop herself. If she fell, it would be painfully spectacular. Around her the others ran with similar haste, weapons glinting in the torchlight.

As the incline became less steep, Rachel regained some control of her strides. Nollin had tripped on the slope, but Halco had dragged him to his feet speedily enough that the pair of seedmen had not fallen too far behind the others. For the moment the delegation had outdistanced the zombies, although Rachel could hear them crashing recklessly down the hillside.

“What now?” Kerick asked, still running as he spoke.

“Some of us could stand our ground and slow them,” Tark offered.

“Too many of them,” Farfalee said. “They’d sweep by you. The sacrifice would be meaningless.”

“Split up?” Nedwin asked.

“That attack felt planned,” Farfalee said, breathing hard. “Sloppy, but with evidence of organization. A group massed around us and came from all sides. If we split up, I expect they will adapt.”

“We need to find a narrow place,” Kerick said. “A position where a few of us might detain them.”

“I saw nothing like that in the area,” Nedwin said. “But we need to veer left up here or we’ll get boxed in by some steep terrain.”

They continued at a sprint, Aram in the front, Halco in the rear, the torches shedding just enough light to allow them to dodge natural obstacles. Behind the group, Rachel could hear their bloodless enemies crashing through bushes and stumbling over rocks. With the delegation running at full speed, the zombies were gradually losing ground. Rachel doubted whether she could sustain this pace for more than a few minutes. She assumed the walking dead could keep charging all night.

“How many were there?” Nollin asked.

“At least forty,” Farfalee said.

“At least sixty,” Nedwin corrected.

“It will be minutes before they overtake us,” Kerick asserted. “Any defensible ground up ahead?”

“A little table of rock,” Nedwin said. “Maybe twenty feet above the surrounding land. One side is rather steep; the others are sheer. If we beat them there, they’d have to climb to reach us.”

“No escape?” Aram asked.

“We’d only go there to make a stand,” Nedwin said. “The inaccessibility makes it defensible. I don’t know of a better option.”

“Lead on,” Farfalee said.

“Agreed,” Drake approved. “If we’re caught in the open, we’re finished.”

“What if a pair of us head off on our own?” Nollin proposed, panting. “A small detachment might avoid detection.”

“It’s a gamble,” Ferrin said. “If the duo gets noticed, they’ll be defenseless. Who’d you have in mind?”

“Some key delegates,” Nollin said. “Perhaps myself and Aram.”

Rachel shook her head. Evidently Nollin had noticed the critical role Aram had played during the escape.

Ferrin laughed openly. “Aram, you’ve been promoted to essential!”

“I’m generally more appreciated at night,” the big man rumbled. “I’m going to the table, Nollin.”

“Maybe we should all remain together,” Nollin repented.

“How far?” Halco asked.

“Maybe five minutes,” Nedwin said. “Beyond this next rise the ground slopes down to a dry creek bed. The little ridge is on the far side.”

They were currently running up a gentle incline. By unspoken assent, nobody was moving at a true sprint anymore. Rachel’s lungs heaved with the effort to maintain her quick jog. She could clearly hear the worm zombies in pursuit. Aside from scattered moans and snarls, most made their presence known by disturbing rocks and foliage.

“They’re gaining,” Halco pointed out.

Farfalee increased her pace, and Rachel strained to match it. A stitch burned in her side, and the muscles in her legs protested painfully.

“Some of them are faster than others,” Nedwin observed. “We’re spreading them out. Many are quite slow.”

They topped the rise and the slope tilted downward. Having the incline back in her favor helped Rachel find her second wind. “Watch out,” Aram called from the front. “Thorns!”



Rachel saw the half giant plowing through bushes that reached higher than his waist, which meant they came to her shoulders. Jason ran just ahead of her, and she could see thorny shrubs tearing at his robes as he charged between them. She tried to follow the path he was clearing, but many of the slender limbs whipped back into place after he ripped free. Her robe snagged in dozens of places. Rachel kept her weary legs churning despite the sharp pricklers shredding the fabric of her robes and occasionally her skin.

Suppressed expressions of pain surrounded her, aggravated hisses seasoned with some angry growls and a wounded yelp from Corinne. Aram was trying to whack the irritating vegetation with his sword, but without accomplishing much. There were just too many shrubs with too many wiry little limbs.

“Forward!” Farfalee ordered as their pace flagged.

Rachel pressed ahead, twisting and lunging in an attempt to avoid the thickest tangles. Sharp points raked scratches across much of her body. Occasionally the thorns stabbed deep, forcing her to swallow exclamations of pain. Under the light of day, the group would have doubtlessly looped around these briars, but in the dark, pursued by undead enemies, their only choice was to push agonizingly onward.

At last Rachel tore free from the last of the taller shrubs. Off to one side, she saw Nedwin towing Corinne from a thorny embrace. Rachel realized that she, Nedwin, Halco, and Corinne were now trailing the others in the group by a significant margin. Several paces ahead, Jason and Tark skidded to a halt, looking back. Close behind her, Rachel heard reckless pursuers blundering through the prickly shrubs.

With countless pricklers still clinging to her robes and needling her skin, Rachel picked up her pace again. “Go!” she shrieked at Jason.

Corinne and Nedwin raced beside her. Halco followed a step or two behind. A hasty glance back showed Rachel the first of the zombies emerging from the spiny shrubs, threadbare clothes mangled. No matter how tired she felt, the frightening sight was sufficient to spur Rachel to her fastest sprint.

Thirty yards ahead, Aram and Ferrin reached the dry creek, dropping down to the rocky bed. The moon emerged from the clouds, unveiling the stone butte on the far side of the creek, vertical walls with a flat top.

Ahead of Rachel, Jason leaped into the creek bed. The lip of the creek was maybe five feet higher than the bed. When Rachel reached the brink, she slowed a bit and used her hands to help break her fall. Rocks ranging in size from apples to melons littered the floor of the creek, making footing

treacherous. But with the worm zombies at her heels, there was no time for caution.

Rachel dashed across the creek bed, a pair of steps behind Corinne and Nedwin, six steps behind Jason. Halco ran at her side, his torch casting a wavering radiance around them. She could hear enemies landing on the stones behind them.

Then a rock shifted beneath Rachel's foot just as she trusted all of her weight to it. She fell hard, unforgiving stones pounding against her, one wrist screaming in pain after she had extended her hands to catch herself.

She was dead. The cold certainty hit her with inarguable clarity. Her injuries meant nothing. She would have no time to really feel them. Her undead enemies were right behind her. Rachel rolled over to her back in time to see the nearest zombie pouncing, grimy hands extended. He had long arms. Dark eyes. Ragged fingernails. A receding hairline.

Reflexively, Rachel raised a protective hand and shouted the Edomic command to push him away. The zombie went flying backward, like he had been hit by an invisible train. His body clipped a couple other undead assailants before he smashed against the low wall of the creek.

Invigorated by the successful command, Rachel beheld the scene with greater lucidity. More enemies were flooding toward her. There were already eight in the creek bed. A dozen more between the creek and the thorny shrubs. Dozens more crashing through the briars.

Halco was using torch and sword to engage a husky man clad in pelts. The combat drew the interest of a few of the nearest attackers. Nedwin and Jason crouched beside Rachel, having returned to help her to her feet. Drake dashed to assist Halco, sword flashing in the torchlight. Knife in hand, Tark placed himself between Rachel and the oncoming zombies.

The zombies were dead, Rachel realized. The worms inside might be alive, but apparently if she focused on the dead flesh, she could use Edomic!

As a desiccated middle-aged woman rushed Tark, Rachel focused on the upper half of her body and spoke the command to gather heat, pouring her panic-fueled will into the effort. The woman burst into flames, and Rachel spoke a fresh command that shoved her backward. Other zombies stumbled away from the blazing woman, eyes squinting away from the brightness. The woman collapsed to the ground, screeching and thrashing.

Halco and Drake had each incapacitated a pair of zombies. Currently a small elderly zombie dangled from Halco's arm, biting his hand. Halco fell as Drake

hacked at the undersized attacker. The successful commands coupled with the horrible danger left Rachel feeling abnormally alert. As more zombies charged Drake and Halco, Rachel infused the nearest pair with fire from the waist up and shoved them toward the others.

The effort left her knees weak. While her spirit exulted, her body suddenly felt drained. From her hours of practice, Rachel knew that she was making too many ambitious commands in succession without resting. She could not keep it up much longer.

Each with an arm around her torso, Nedwin and Jason hauled Rachel across the creek bed, her arms draped across their necks, her wrist aching. She tried to help, but her legs felt limp and distant.

Farther back, Drake helped Halco retreat while a fresh wave of zombies dashed forward. "Just the heads," Rachel murmured, looking over her shoulder.

Exerting her will, she began setting the heads of the attackers on fire, one after another, working from the nearest to the farthest. The smaller targets required less effort than igniting the entire upper body, and the result seemed equally effective, leaving the victims writhing in the creek bed. After igniting the fifth head, Rachel felt blackness encroaching at the edge of her vision, and paused. She had a metallic taste in her mouth. Her head pounded.

Flaming bodies lay strewn between the zombies and their prey. The nearest zombies hesitated, baring their teeth to hiss at the fire.

"It got me," Halco huffed to Drake, who had a supportive arm across his shoulders. "I saw worms enter my wrist. Take my amar."

Sheathing his sword, Drake drew a dagger in one hand and cupped the other against the base of Halco's skull, where his seed was located. Rachel glanced away as the dagger moved, but looked back in time to see Drake placing the amar in a pouch as Halco slumped to the stony ground.

Nedwin and Jason dragged Rachel up the far side of the creek bed as the undead attackers rallied, weaving between the burning corpses. The foremost zombies descended on Halco in a frenzy.

Without Halco slowing him, Drake caught up as Rachel, Tark, Nedwin, and Jason reached the base of the rocky butte. The others were already scaling it. The least steep side was still quite a climb, only leaning slightly away from vertical, although it offered abundant handholds.

"Can you manage?" Nedwin asked.

"No strength," Rachel said. She doubted she could walk, let alone scale a steep wall. "Bad wrist."

Aram landed beside Rachel after having dropped the last several feet of the descent. He heaved her over one beefy shoulder, as if she weighed nothing. The others were climbing. Aram started up as well.

Rachel found herself facing an onrushing mob of tattered men and women, old and young, grotesquely eager. Aram was rising, but the mob would reach the butte in time to claw at his boots, perhaps to climb after him and tear him down. She felt angry. These bloodthirsty creatures had attacked without provocation. They had killed Halco. They yearned to kill all of her friends.

Extending a hand, lips moving soundlessly, she focused heat on several in the front, then mentally pushed with all of her might, hurling her will at them with the psychic equivalent of a lunging dive at the end of a hard run. She dimly saw the flames engulfing them and felt the warm rush of heat as she sank into unconsciousness.

# THE SENTINELS

Jason peered down from the brink of the huge stone block as Aram climbed below him. He flinched back as the leaders of the oncoming zombies burst into flames, a few of them from head to toe, others along one side, or just the head and shoulders. Several zombies stampeded into their burning comrades, flames spreading as they tumbled to the ground at the base of the butte. Dry wails filled the night. The nearest unburned zombies fell back, snarling impotently.

Apparently Rachel had been eating her Wheaties! Jason knew she had been practicing her Edomic, but had no idea that she had grown so powerful. She had saved them back at the creek bed. Thanks to her, around twenty zombies must have perished.

As Aram reached the top of the butte, the zombies below resurged, dodging around disgusting bonfires to start climbing the little mesa. Drake, Ferrin, Tark, Nedwin, Nollin, and Corinne began hurling rocks gathered from the top of the butte down the side. Jason joined in, discovering that solid throws to the head sent the hideous climbers tumbling.

Aram gently laid Rachel on her back and bent over her. As Jason saw the barrage of stones successfully repelling the climbing zombies, he hurried to her side. She was breathing shallowly, her face pale.

“Wiped herself out,” Aram said.

“She wields serious power,” Farfalee acknowledged. “If she’s breathing, she’ll recover. Aram, we need you guarding the edge.”

Kerick approached Farfalee. “I see three of the dead standing aloof on the far side of the creek,” he reported quietly.

“The masterminds?” Farfalee asked.

“They’re the only enemies showing restraint,” Kerick said. “I suspect they’re coordinating the others.”

Jason gazed where Kerick had indicated, and saw the zombies he had mentioned. They stood side-by-side on a mound well back from the creek, still and silent, one quite tall and the other two rather short.

Farfalee set an arrow to the string and bent her bow. Jason wondered if an arrow could reach that far. She tilted the bow upward and released. The projectile curved away into the night, and landed in the head of the tallest zombie. He fell out of sight and the other two hid as well.

“What a shot,” Jason said, hardly believing it.

“I’ve had some practice,” Farfalee replied.

“They’re pulling back!” Aram called, hurling a stone larger than a bowling ball.

Nedwin approached Farfalee, jutting his chin toward where her arrow had flown. “Those three were the leaders?”

“Appears so,” she replied.

“I can get the other two,” Nedwin said.

“By all means,” she invited.

Dropping flat to the ground, Nedwin crept like a salamander to the opposite side of the butte from where they had ascended, then slunk over the edge.

“Don’t watch him,” Farfalee murmured, turning away. “If he succeeds, it will be by stealth.”

“They’re already re-forming,” Aram said.

“They might try to send some up one of the steeper faces,” Farfalee warned. “Corinne, watch that one. Nollin, the far one. I’ll keep an eye on the other.”

Corinne moved to watch the designated face. The others were gathering rocks to help repel the next assault.

“Drake,” Nollin said. “I’ll keep Halco’s amar.”

“If you prefer,” Drake replied, fishing the seed from a pouch. “That should keep the amar away from the fighting.”

Nollin grunted. “Some of us have to survive for the good of the mission. Seems like it’s chiefly my people laying down their lives on our behalf so far.”

“Which is according to plan,” Farfalee reminded everyone. “Nollin, please watch the rear approach.”

He hustled over to the far side of the butte to stand guard.

Two more attacks came in the next few minutes, both quelled before the zombies gained much ground. Aram could throw large stones with chilling accuracy, leaving undead enemies functionless after a direct hit or two. A pair tried to scale the back side, but failed.

Rachel remained unconscious throughout. Jason checked her breathing and pulse during lulls.

After the first two attacks, the night became still. Eventually Nedwin returned, signaling carefully before climbing the easiest side.

“They’ve pulled back,” he announced after reaching the top. “I dispatched two of the three leaders. They were a little tough to find. I finished the man with the arrow in his head and cut down a short, older man. I left the woman alive after she vowed to withdraw with her remaining forces.”

“She could communicate?” Farfalee asked.

“With some exertion, yes. Her mind is far gone. But with her companions disabled and having freshly lost a limb, she made the effort.”

“You believe we can trust her?” Nollin challenged.

“Not much,” Nedwin replied. “But I wanted to prevent us from getting besieged here. I think we can at least trust her sense of self-preservation. More than half of her followers have been rendered inert. She knows I can get to her whenever I choose. I watched her lead the others away before I returned. I demanded that they go north, away from our route, and they complied.”

“You didn’t get infected?” Nollin asked.

“I’m uncompromised,” Nedwin said.

“We should move,” Ferrin urged. “The leader could change her mind. Or she might lose control of her minions. Nedwin is right. We can’t afford to get pinned down.”

“I agree,” Farfalee said. “We’ll have to choose our campsites with greater care. Our scouts should range even farther. Had we stopped for the night atop this rock, we might still have Halco with us.”

“I’ll carry the girl,” Aram muttered, picking up Rachel carefully.

Jason found the climb down the little bluff disconcerting. Fleeing up the craggy slope to escape zombies had seemed simple. But while descending, he found it hard to decide where to place his hands and feet. Forced to gaze down in search of handholds, he became disconcertingly aware of the height and the potential fall. Corinne seemed to climb down without much trouble, which motivated him to endure the descent without complaint.

The rest of the night passed quietly, although Jason kept a hand on his sword. He had slashed his way past two zombies during the hurried escape. It had felt like hacking at bundles of dead sticks—they weren’t overly heavy or solid, and his blade hadn’t cut very deep. He had basically used his sword as a tool to knock them away while he dodged around them.

The group remained in motion until dawn, when Aram shrank and had to lay Rachel down. Nedwin, Kerick, Drake, and Ferrin were off scouting in

different directions. Farfalee knelt beside Rachel and wafted a tiny bag of smelling salts beneath her nostrils. Rachel's eyes opened abruptly, and she sat up with a gasp.

Farfalee placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. "We're all right," the seedwoman assured her.

Rachel sagged a bit. "That's good." She narrowed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "Ow!"

"You overextended yourself," Farfalee said. "I used to see it with wizards of old."

"I burned a lot of those zombies," Rachel said with a smile.

"Yes," Farfalee said. "I was surprised how much power you brought to bear. If you were able to muster much more, you probably would have destroyed yourself along with them. Be grateful you passed out. You must learn to rein in your abilities before they destroy you. It would be shameful to see such promise snuffed out."

"I'll try to be careful," Rachel said, although her expression looked stubborn rather than repentant. "You knew wizards?"

"The eldest of my people remember our father, Eldrin, and the wizards of his time," she said. "And I am among the eldest. Can you stand?"

"I think so." With help Rachel arose, her face scrunched up. "My head is pounding. And my joints feel sore."

"Ideally, I would let you rest," Farfalee apologized. "Unfortunately, we're far from the ideal out here."

"And our biggest asset won't be back until sundown," Jason added.

Farfalee nodded. "Without Aram to force a way past our attackers, we might all have perished. Let's hope we can evade them throughout the day."

It was afternoon when Drake reported the approaching horsemen.

"Three of them," he said, still breathing hard after his sprint to rejoin the group. "Heading right for us."

Farfalee suggested they retreat to the cover of some boulders to help negate any advantage the horses might offer. She got her bow ready. Nedwin and Ferrin returned from scouting before the horsemen came into sight, although Kerick remained abroad.

All three horsemen wore helmets and armor. They cantered briskly, eventually bringing their steeds to a halt and saluting from a distance. "Hail, visitors to our



land,” called the foremost rider. He waved a white handkerchief. “May we approach and confer under a flag of truce?”

“You may,” Farfalee invited.

The horsemen rode forward at a walk, stopping several paces shy of the cluster of boulders. “Who is your leader?” asked the rider in front, face hidden by a visor.

“I am,” Farfalee answered boldly, striding into view. “Who do you represent?”

“The last remnant of the grand kingdom of Ebera,” he replied, removing his helm. The rider looked to be in his twenties, with thick auburn hair, heavy eyebrows, and shaggy sideburns. He had an unhealthy pallor.

“You’re not infected?” Farfalee asked, astonished.

He gave a somber smile. “None escaped the plague. Some of us have managed to cling to our reason. You are one of the Amar Kabal?”

“Indeed,” Farfalee answered. “Great need has brought us into your realm.”

“No doubt you have your reasons,” he acknowledged. “You come at a timely hour. Our reasoning citizenry has dwindled. Only a few years ago we had five settlements. Now three remain. We must outlast the mindless ones and the hungry ones.”

“We faced many of the walking dead last night,” Farfalee said.

The rider nodded. “Many fell. Others have been left vulnerable. Our leaders are strategizing over how best to exploit the opportunity. Come with us. Let us escort you to safe beds and warm food.”

“Safe beds?” Farfalee questioned. “Shouldn’t we fear contamination?”

“We mean you no harm,” the rider assured her. “We are drawn to your blood, but we have learned to curb our thirst. We keep herds within the city walls and sate our urges with the blood of animals. We could use your help, and you need ours. The mindless ones and hungry ones have united into savage tribes. The largest lies to the south and already has your scent.”

“How many?” Farfalee asked.

“Several hundred,” he replied, “including a multitude of cunning chieftains.”

Jason shivered. How could they possibly get past an army of several hundred zombies?

“Perhaps you can aid us,” Farfalee allowed. “We have to cross your land and reach the Prophetess of Mianamon to the south.”

The rider hesitated before responding. “You’re aware that none who enter Ebera are permitted to leave.”

“Our need is an exception,” Farfalee stated.

His unblinking eyes did not leave hers. “We allow no exceptions. Do you understand the virulence of this condition? A mighty kingdom succumbed within days. We sentinels have stood watch ever since to contain the epidemic. Without our efforts and our fortunate geography, all of Lyrian would share our fate.”

“I am Farfalee, daughter of Hessit,” Farfalee said calmly. “What is your name?”

“Borial.”

“Inform us about the condition, Borial.”

“The goma worms inhabit human flesh,” Borial said. “We have encountered no other susceptible animal. The worms were perfectly engineered in that respect. They feed on blood, preferably human, but any fresh blood can nourish them. Introduced to a living subject, the worms multiply and consume all internal blood within two days. Once the blood is depleted, the worms keep the body operational and share the desire for more blood with their host.”

“How did you resist the urges?” Farfalee asked.

“Strength of will, I suppose,” Borial said. “I’ve always had a deep sense of self and a strong respect for propriety, which is common among those who have resisted. My aptitude for resistance may also be physiological, a consequence of how the worms physically interact with my tissue and my brain. Most could not suppress the urge, which helped the disease spread. Without the blood of animals, the hunger would eventually govern even the strongest of us. As we’re injured, or as we age, some among us lose our restraint.”

“You appear young,” Farfalee observed.

“The worms preserve our bodies at the age we were taken,” he said. “They can work remarkable feats of healing. But every injury takes a toll, particularly where the brain is involved.”

“Some of the walking dead seem to have lost their humanity,” Nedwin observed. “But the leaders among those we faced were still capable of speech.”

“Succumbing to the hunger seems to accelerate the decline of the mind,” Borial said. “In the end, they become the mindless ones. Some hold on to awareness longer than others. The hungry ones lack restraint but retain some human cunning.”

“Why haven’t they sought to escape Ebera?” Farfalee asked.

“Some have tried,” Borial said. “We don’t let them. We have patrolled the borders since we first established any stability. King Linus helped protect the reasoning individuals among the infected and saved Lyrian. He burned the

ships, wrecked the ferries, demolished the bridges, and closed the borders. He retained his reason after becoming infected, and helped those of us with self-possession to wall ourselves away from the others.

“The early days were ugliest. An endless massacre on both sides. Entire towns burned. Fire is the best way to ensure the destruction of the worms. They can hibernate for centuries. Over time they can knit broken bodies back into functionality.

“I do not believe Kel Jerud meant to destroy the world if thieves invaded his tower. Just Ebera. For all their adaptability, he designed the worms with several weaknesses. They are not fond of sunlight. They detest extreme heat and cold. They abhor water. And they perish in fire.”

“I see,” Farfalee said. “The abhorrence of water keeps them off the sea and away from the rivers. The dislike of cold keeps them from scaling the mountains or working their way into the tundra. Their distaste for sunlight further discourages travel. And should all else fail, the reasoning dead hold them in check.”

“Correct,” Borial confirmed. “I’m not sure Kel Jerud anticipated the reasoning dead. We’re actually most important for people like you. Mortals who cross into Ebera and who might exit contaminated actually pose the greatest threat. King Linus still wears the crown, and his incontrovertible edict is that all who enter Ebera must remain. We will attempt to let you dwell among us without contamination for as long as possible. Our settlements are within strong walls, though the largest tribes of hungry ones have found ways to threaten our security of late.”

“Did they only recently become organized?” Nedwin asked.

“To this scale, yes,” Borial replied. “A startling adaptation. One of our great advantages, despite our limited numbers, has always been our capacity for teamwork. Over the years, we began to realize our dream of hunting the mindless ones into extinction. We bred livestock behind our walls while in the surrounding countryside easy prey had grown scarce. The most devious of the hungry ones kept out of our way, hiding in deep lairs. In recent years they have begun to unite and attract followers. All of us can detect blood from great distances, and the blood of our livestock called to them. Unity was the only way to rob us, so they united, and some of our strongholds have fallen, along with some of our most stalwart warriors. Only the three strongest settlements remain, defended by fewer hands than any of us would prefer.”

“And you want our help defending your walls,” Farfalee concluded.

“That, and more,” Borial acknowledged. “Human blood is irresistible to our foes. They can survive on animal blood, but yours is nectar. The scent of your blood could lure them into folly. If we can finally trap them and burn them, all of Lyrian will be safer.”

“We are also on a mission to save Lyrian,” Farfalee explained.

“From what threat?” Borial inquired.

“The emperor Maldor,” Farfalee said. “The former apprentice to Zokar is poised to bring all of Lyrian under his dominion. Our party represents the last hope for the races of Eldrin and any who oppose darkness, injustice, and tyranny.”

“I am willing to accept that your cause is just and good,” Borial said. “However our duties as the sentinels of Ebera transcend all matters of politics and personal interest. None who enter Ebera may leave for any reason. We will faithfully uphold that decree until the last of us expires.”

“We’re not infected,” Drake said with some heat in his voice. “If we were compromised, yes, by all means, prevent us from leaving. But since we’re whole, why not help us make it through your kingdom without contamination?”

“This plague could destroy all human life in Lyrian,” Borial bristled. “The only sure way to contain it is by never making exceptions.”

“Exceptions have already been made,” Ferrin countered. “Maldor has sent spies into Ebera more than once. He will do so again. If he can use the plague as a weapon, he will. He must be stopped. He represents a much greater threat of contamination than our modest delegation. He is the enemy we seek to dethrone.”

“We’ve been attacked by one group of worm-infested maniacs already,” Drake asserted in a steely tone. “Despite your powers of reason, I’m not finding much difference between you and your less civil countrymen, except in numbers.”

“Drake,” Farfalee cautioned.

“What?” Drake replied coldly. “You see where this is going. It won’t end politely, so there’s no use in squandering valuable time.”

“Does this one speak for all of you?” Borial asked, eyes darting.

“We need horses,” Farfalee said. “With horses we could easily cross Ebera without becoming contaminated.”

“Perhaps,” Borial considered. “We would have to visit the lord of our settlement. If you explain your need in full, he might grant what you ask.”

An arrow appeared in Farfalee's hand, ready to fly, her bow suddenly stretched. Jason could not say how she had nocked and pulled it so quickly. "We won't walk into any traps. You cannot imagine the import of our mission. Let us continue on our way, and we will let you return to your duties. You need to dismount now, or your reasoning dead will lose another able warrior."

Borial smirked. "Farfalee, there are many others like me—mounted, well equipped, and ready to do anything to prevent you and your comrades from leaving Ebera. They know where I am. They know when I should return. Listen to reason. Do not act rashly. Lay down your arms. Join us. Trust others to take up your cause. Your road must end here, for the good of all."

"I don't want to harm you," Farfalee said, unflinching. "We need your mounts, and I can't have you warning your fellow sentinels."

Borial did nothing to conceal his outrage. "I have spent more than a hundred years protecting you!" His eyes shifted to Drake. "And you." Then to Nedwin. "And you. Yet you threaten me because you find the precautions necessary to safeguard humankind inconvenient?" He plunged a hand into a satchel and pulled out a heap of little gray balls piled onto his palm. "Hibernating goma worms. Of no threat to me. But potentially quite problematic for you. Should I toss them in your direction, at least half of you will face infection. That might alter the tenor of our conversation."

Jason prepared to dive behind the nearest boulder. The other horsemen had each grabbed their own handful of worms.

"Is there any room for compromise here?" Farfalee asked, her arrow trained on the center of Borial's forehead.

Before Borial could reply, his hand burst into flame. So did the hands of the other two riders. So did all three satchels from which the goma worms had been withdrawn.

"Fly!" Borial cried, face contorted in pain. The three riders wheeled their horses about. Farfalee put futile arrows in two of their backs. Nedwin darted from amid the boulders and tore one rider from the saddle before his horse could pick up speed. Extending a hand, Rachel flung Borial from his saddle with a gesture and a word, then dropped to one knee, one hand pressed to the hollow of her temple, blood leaking from one nostril.

The third rider was getting away, beyond the reach of any in the company—until Kerick leaped out of hiding and tackled him from his saddle. Jason could hear Rachel murmuring Edomic from her kneeling position.

"Knock it off," Jason said. "You're wiped out. You haven't healed."

She glared up at him defiantly, brows knitted in pain. "We need the horses."

Jason noticed that the horses had slowed and were coming back around. "Okay, good point, but we've got it from here." She bowed her head. He knelt beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "You okay?"

She nodded, eyes squeezed shut. "Ever had an ice cream headache?"

"Sure."

"Picture having a really bad one and then guzzling down a freezing shake."

Jason winced. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Bad luck. I was barely starting to feel a little better. At least the commands worked. Did the zombies get away?"

Jason looked up. "We've got them. And the fires are out. We have the horses, too. Good job."

## THE WILD CLAN

The three horses made all the difference. Suddenly Rachel could ride instead of hobble along, one scout could thoroughly explore the territory ahead, and another could effectively monitor the country around them.

Nollin had been loudest in his desire to slay the injured sentinels. Farfalee contended that Borial was indeed engaged in a noble cause and should be given the maximum possible leniency. Nedwin noted that the riders must have ranged far on horseback, and on foot would probably not find their comrades in time to cause harm. Nollin argued that search parties might find Borial in time to mount a pursuit. In the end, they left Borial and his two countrymen alive but without footwear.

For Rachel, the first day on horseback was agony. Her sore, swollen wrist was the least of her problems. It felt like her skull had shattered into irregular fragments and was now only held together by her scalp. Every jolt as her mount plodded forward stabbed painfully throughout her head. Rachel felt Corinne trying to contact her telepathically, but even the simple effort of will that allowed Rachel to understand the messages was too great. She could hardly think through the pain, let alone attempt telepathy.

Nedwin gave her a preparation for the pain, but despite the unfortunate taste and unpleasant medicinal smell, the concoction did nothing to ease her suffering. What if the damage from the overexertion was permanent? What if the pain never subsided? What if the injury was to her mind rather than merely her brain? Worries plagued her as the pain gnawed persistently into the night.

By the next day, her body showed signs of recovery. Her joints were stiff rather than sore, her wrist was less bothersome, her appetite was returning, and the ache in her head had eased to an uncomfortable tenderness that flared less violently than the day before.

Rachel wondered what exactly the magic had done to her body. Were the headaches a side effect of the forces called into action by the Edomic commands or a direct result of overextending her will? Could she expect similar symptoms

after overtaxing herself in the future, or would she face a new set of unwelcome consequences? She hoped never to find out.

On the morning of the third day after meeting Borial, while still bundled where she had slept, Rachel heard Farfalee arguing with Ferrin.

“We’ve approached the wild horses twice,” Ferrin said. “They’re too skittish. You would be too if every person you met was a zombie intent on draining your blood. Even astride our own horses, we haven’t gotten close. If she could just calm them.”

“Did you watch her face yesterday?” Farfalee asked. “Have you noticed how she moves like an old woman? I tell you, any exercise of Edomic before she mends puts her at great risk.”

“And an army of hundreds of the walking dead puts us all at great risk,” Nollin answered. “They can smell us from miles away, and for all we know, they’ve assembled and are preparing to intercept us as we speak. She’s the only one who can do this.”

“The mobility more horses would offer could save our lives,” Kerick said.

“Once she mends,” Farfalee said. “She needs more—”

“I’m mended enough,” Rachel interrupted, sitting up. “You found horses?”

Farfalee glared at Ferrin, Kerick, and Nollin before turning to Rachel. “You’ve been through some heavy trauma,” Farfalee said. “You saw what happened when you pushed yourself too hard before recovering.”

“It was worse than the first big effort,” Rachel admitted. “And that was bad enough. But I’m feeling better now.”

“You keep resting,” Farfalee insisted. “You could very well develop into our greatest weapon against Maldor.”

“I won’t develop into anything if we all get eaten by zombies. Besides, influencing horses is more a suggestion than a command. It doesn’t take as much effort.”

Farfalee sighed. She glanced at Ferrin and Kerick, then back at Rachel. “Very well. Since the need is urgent, I’ll defer to your judgment.” She turned to Ferrin. “When Drake and Nedwin return, go see what you can find.”

Rachel found Corinne and Jason breakfasting on fruit and nuts. Jason met her eyes with a smile. “You look better!”

“Thanks,” Rachel said. “It feels like the day after being sick. I’m not all the way back, but so much better than the worst of it.” Rachel winked at Corinne. *Good to see you, too!*

*Are you sure you can talk like this?* Corinne checked worriedly.



*Feels natural again*, Rachel assured her.

“Are you guys already doing telepathy?” Jason asked. “That was the one good thing about your headache. People using words for a change.”

“We still use words,” Rachel said.

Jason shook his head regretfully. “It’s like everyone is texting, and I don’t have a phone.”

Rachel ate nuts and fruit with Jason and Corinne. Their camaraderie felt more natural and pleasant than ever, probably because she was no longer imprisoned in her own private cell of anguish.

After Drake and Nedwin returned, Ferrin claimed Nedwin’s mount and Rachel climbed onto hers. Drake, Ferrin, and Rachel set out toward where Nedwin had last spotted the wild herd. For everyone to have a horse, they would need eight more. Ferrin and Drake each bore a pair of improvised rope halters.

They rode for the better part of an hour before pausing on a ridge to gaze down on the herd in a valley below. Even from a distance, the wild horses looked considerably mangier than their current mounts.

“Can you reach them from here?” Ferrin asked.

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “The chances go up as we get nearer.”

“They’ll run if we get too near,” Drake said. “They’ve learned to keep away from people.”

“As we move closer, I’ll keep sending calming messages,” Rachel assured them. “What do you guys need to do?”

“I brought some of the sweetleaves that I normally save for tea,” Drake said.

“I have fruit,” Ferrin said. “If Drake and I can each claim a pair of horses, we’ll be halfway to our goal.”

“There must be at least thirty,” Rachel estimated.

“Seems like plenty,” Drake said. “But they’re fast, and they’re unburdened by riders. So far Ferrin and I haven’t managed to get close enough to have any chance of catching one. Kerick knows horses as well and has had no luck either.”

“If you can keep them from running,” Ferrin said, “we’ll do the rest.”

From where she sat, Rachel invited the horses to eat and relax. As Drake and Ferrin led her closer, she sent calming Edomic messages. She told the horses that she, Ferrin, and Drake meant no harm. She sent impressions of safety and security. As she pushed hard, Rachel noticed a faint pain blossoming behind her eyes.

By the time they reached the herd, the horses were all grazing tranquilly. Most of the horses appeared scrawnier than the other mounts Rachel had seen in Lyrian. But despite their unkempt coats and rawboned frames, they generally seemed healthy. A few let out gentle whickers to welcome the newcomers. Most paid them no mind.

Ferrin and Drake approached their prospects on foot, petting them and sharing treats before slipping on halters. Rachel spoke peace to the horses, and evidently they listened.

“What other horses would you ideally want?” Rachel asked.

After conferring, Drake and Ferrin pointed out four other mounts. While Ferrin and Drake each led a pair of horses, Rachel called to the other four with her mind. More than ten followed, and then the entire herd.

Rachel had an annoying headache by the time they made it back to camp. The others could not believe the bounteous equine entourage, and set about rigging additional halters. By the time the sun went down, everyone had spent time getting accustomed to their chosen mount. Though wild and presumably never ridden, the horses remained mostly obedient and manageable. Rachel went to sleep with her head throbbing at a tolerable level.

Halco entered camp shortly before sunrise. He approached with his hands up, Nedwin riding behind him, and showed no ire at the bows bent in his direction. Several of the horses let out spirited whinnies, but even those without pickets did not gallop away.

“He claims he hasn’t lost his mind,” Nedwin explained.

“I haven’t,” Halco affirmed. “I’ve lost my amar, and my life, and my looks, but somehow my mind remains.”

His robes were soiled and torn, and all visible skin was pale and blemished with puckered scars. The tips of two adjacent fingers were missing, as were some patches of his long hair. And he moved with less grace, favoring one leg slightly.

“I’m full of worms, naturally,” he announced. “I checked. But since I retained my sense of self, I decided I might still be of service. I chose to track you. I know I’m little more than a ghost. My real self is in the amar. But I thought I may as well do all I can to help ensure I get planted somewhere far from here.”

“Can you ... smell us?” Nollin asked.

“Your blood? I can, yes. The walking dead apparently feasted on me. I was unconscious. They drained me, and the worms took whatever I had left before I woke. I awoke bloodless. I didn’t even have traces on my robes. Your smell made

it easier to track you. I could hurry through the night without rest. So far I feel no fatigue. I figured you could give me a clean end when we reach the river.”

“You can control your appetite?” Farfalee asked. Her direct tone demanded honesty.

“I believe so,” Halco answered without pause. “Considering what I’ve become, it’s odd how unchanged my mind feels. I think I can regulate myself. I feel well inside of my limits. I don’t expect to be a threat. I might be a help, though.”

“Does it hurt?” Nollin asked hesitantly.

“No pain. My senses have changed. The sun bothers my eyes. My hearing has an irritating echo. While my sense of touch has been dulled, I’ve grown much more sensitive to smell. I’m still getting accustomed to it.”

“If a horse will carry you, please join us,” Farfalee invited. “But watch yourself. Keep your distance. No close proximity. It will be the token of your self-control.”

“I won’t disappoint you.”

The wild horses proved sturdy. With three or four mounted scouts roving, and everyone on horseback, the group made rapid progress. Following advice from the scouts, they took a zigzag route to keep well away from the mobs of zombies trying to close in on them. The horses proved much quicker than even the most eager zombies. The vast horde of walking dead to the south had no chance of heading them off once they had been spotted and a detour was devised.

Moving ambitiously during the day allowed the delegation to almost relax at night. Still, they remained vigilant, with a mounted sentry always in motion, and their weapons ready. Halco prowled the darkness on foot, a tireless fail-safe.

Within a few days Rachel could feel no lingering effects from her overexertion earlier in the week. She issued suggestions to the horses at her leisure without adverse reactions and maintained effortless telepathic conversations with Corinne. If anything, she felt more capable than before. Most of the herd had stopped following them, but five riderless stragglers persisted, even after Rachel had gently invited them to leave. In the end, she decided that a few spare mounts wouldn’t hurt anything.

The morning they sighted the Silver River glistening in the distance was the same morning Kerick galloped to the group and breathlessly reported a host of more than a hundred riders in hasty pursuit.

“Can we make it to the river?” Farfalee asked.

“Maybe,” Kerick answered. “They’re coming hard from the southeast. We’ll have to veer southwest to have a chance of reaching the water first.”

“Of course, crossing the river will be the problem,” Aram observed.

Rachel frowned. The Silver River was the main eastern outlet for runoff from the mountains. Farfalee had warned that it averaged more than half a mile across.

“To the southwest,” Farfalee urged.

They ran the horses hard for the first time. Until now, the greatest need had been to conserve energy. Rachel enjoyed the wind in her face, and she sent suggestions to the mounts to run quickly and steadily.

As they cantered across the top of a tall ridge, Rachel glanced back and glimpsed their pursuers for the first time, a galloping cavalry small with distance. Kerick had been right. There looked to be at least a hundred of them. A hundred reasoning undead warriors, armored and mounted. Rachel wondered how many of them she would set on fire before she fell. Then she wondered if she should even resist them. After all, they were just trying to keep the world safe from the ravages of a devastating plague. Hiding from the thought, she clung to the small hope that she and her friends might outrun them.

As the glittering expanse of the Silver River drew nearer, a pair of horsemen appeared up ahead, racing toward them. Of the four scouts, only Drake had failed to report back since the undead riders were sighted. One of the two riders was Drake. The other turned out to be Sakar, the emissary to the drinlings, whom Rachel had not seen since the Seven Vales.

“This way,” Sakar ordered without explanation.

They followed him west, directly away from the riders, paralleling the river rather than heading toward it. Farfalee rode beside Sakar, but Rachel could not overhear the conversation.

The delegation reached a mounting series of low ridges backed by sizable hills. Atop the first ridge, Sakar pulled his horse to a stop. The brush around him stirred, and several men and women stood up, wrapped in cloaks expertly designed to blend with the wild terrain. Rachel felt her horse prance nervously, and quietly spoke Edomic words of comfort.

“Meet Ul, son of Tha,” Sakar said gravely, “chief of the wild clan of drinlings.”

A stocky man with a broad nose and heavy jaw nodded curtly. His mouth was firm, but smile lines radiated from his attentive eyes. His golden brown skin had a different tint than any complexion Rachel had seen before, and his irises

were coppery, like bright pennies. The coloring seemed shared by the other members of his party.

Ul turned to Sakar and spoke in an indecipherable burst of rapid, clipped syllables.

“He tells me we should fall back and try to keep out of sight,” Sakar translated. “He will confer with the sentinels of Ebera on our behalf.”

“Thank you,” Farfalee said, bowing her head in appreciation.

Ul gave a curt nod and waved her away.

Rachel and the others followed Sakar to a higher ridge. After securing the horses, Sakar led the group to a position where they could observe the plain below unobtrusively from behind a screen of tall brush. Rachel positioned herself near Farfalee and Sakar.

“The wild clan are drinlings?” Rachel asked quietly.

“Correct,” Farfalee said. “Evidently, the drinlings are the only race in Lyrian immune to the goma worms. In recent years they have played an increasingly pivotal role patrolling the Silver River.”

“I only recently learned this as I explained our need,” Sakar said. “The drinlings are divided into forty clans. The wild clan has historically provided many of the finest drinling warriors and has maintained close ties with the Amar Kabal.”

“Mind you,” Farfalee inserted, “drinlings seldom live more than two years. So for them, it has been many generations since they have worked with Sakar or any of our people.”

“But they keep an extensive oral history,” Sakar said. “A necessity if they hope to preserve a group identity, in spite of their brief life spans.”

The undead horsemen came into view on the far side of the plain, riding hard. As Rachel watched from the top of the ridge, she thought surely there must be many more than a hundred. “What will happen?” Rachel asked, noticing that Jason and Ferrin had drifted over close enough to listen.

“They will talk,” Sakar said. “Ul will claim we are all in his custody. He will ask the sentinels of Ebera to leave the matter in his hands.”

“And if they refuse?” Rachel asked.

“The wild clan is ready and willing to fight,” Sakar said. “The result would be tragic. We need the sentinels of Ebera right where they are, doing just what they’re doing.”

“The drinlings could win?” Rachel asked.

“Drinlings were made to fight,” Farfalee said. “It’s like Eldrin somehow compressed eighty years of energy into two. The drinlings are strong, tireless warriors. They don’t die easily, and they heal very quickly. They’re immune to most sicknesses and toxins. They never sleep, not even in a trance. They can eat and digest almost anything—even soil. They supposedly can also draw energy from the air and the sun.”

“And there are more drinlings ready to take the field than a glance would suggest,” Sakar added. “Horses or not, the sentinels won’t stand a chance.”

“Why are the drinlings helping us?” Jason asked.

“The drinlings are not currently avoiding the war because they love Felrook,” Sakar answered. “On the contrary, for years the drinlings stood between Maldor and the east coast of Lyrian. They made the kingdom of Kadara untouchable and received aid from Kadara in the form of men and arms.

“As the conflict wore on, and as more kingdoms fell elsewhere, Maldor brought ever greater hosts against the drinlings. Eventually the drinlings’ numbers began to dwindle. The king of Kadara withdrew his support from the drinlings, choosing instead to fortify his defenses. Kadara and others had taken the fierce commitment of the drinlings for granted for ages, but in this instance, the drinlings surprised everyone. Instead of sacrificing themselves to buy Kadara more time to prepare, the drinlings quit the fight. They abruptly stopped resisting and turned their efforts to evading. They know the hills south of here like no other people, and eventually the hosts of Maldor gave up trying to chase them. The commanders opted to bypass the drinlings and engage Kadara.”

“Kadara definitely had it coming,” Ferrin murmured.

“So where do they stand now?” Rachel asked.

“In the years since quitting the fight, the numbers of the drinlings have made a significant recovery,” Sakar explained.

“It helps when pregnancy lasts little more than a week, and twins or triplets are common,” Farfalee commented.

Sakar nodded. “There has always been a high mortality rate with drinling women during childbirth. That rate is increasing. But they are doing their best. I told Ul about Galloran’s return and the possible involvement of the Amar Kabal against Felrook. He knows that once Kadara falls, the drinlings will be encompassed by enemies. If this rebellion comes to fruition, he pledged the involvement of his clan.”

“What of the other clans?” Ferrin asked.

“Ul and I will work to convince them,” Sakar said. “It may take some time. For now, he has vowed to intervene with the sentinels of Ebera on our behalf. It was he who warned me that the sentinels would never allow you to cross the Silver River. He brought his people across in unprecedented numbers to give you a chance.”

On the plain below the ridge, a detachment of riders approached Ul and a party of drinlings. Rachel was much too far away to catch any of the words. At one point, Ul turned and gave a signal with one arm. Hundreds of drinlings stood up along the ridge and on the plain, casting aside their camouflaged cloaks.

The discussion on the plain continued. Eventually, the detachment of riders turned and galloped back to their comrades. Within minutes, the undead horsemen were riding away to the east.

In time, Ul joined Sakar and Farfalee on the ridge. Three others came forward with him—a girl and a boy who looked not much older than Rachel or Jason, and an older man crisscrossed with scars, especially on the left side of his face and body. His left hand was missing, replaced by a sharp metal spike with a small hook affixed to one side.

The girl introduced herself as Nia, the boy as Io. “My father wishes us to speak for him,” the girl said in a clear voice with a slight accent. “He has little patience for a language so tedious as yours.”

“He means no offense,” Io clarified. “Our language, Ji, conveys information much more succinctly, although it lacks the variety and nuances of your tongue.” Rachel immediately liked Io. He seemed calm and considerate. And it didn’t hurt that he had handsome features—more boy band than rock star, but undeniably cute.

“Father negotiated your freedom,” Nia said. “We have a boat waiting to convey you to the south. We keep a few hidden along the river. You will officially remain under our vigilant watch for three days. If any of you have contracted the plague, you will be burned.”

Halco cleared his throat. “I’m infected.”

A brief patter of syllables flowed from Ul.

“Father says you can either perish by fire or seek to join the sentinels,” Io relayed.

Brow lowered, Halco thumbed a jagged scar on the back of one hand. He attempted to answer twice before the words came out. “I might prefer to join the

sentinels. My hunger remains manageable, and I suppose they can find a use for every man they can get.”

The request was translated, and Ul favored Halco with a nodding smile of acknowledgment. Through Io, he assured Halco that his assistance would be valued.

“My father also desires to relate that my brother and I are intended as gifts to your cause,” Nia said. “He was informed that you would need representatives from his people to join you at Mianamon, to allow for a more accurate prophecy. Of all his children, we are the slowest.”

“Meaning we are most adept at conversing in your language,” Io added. “And we are young, so we still have much life ahead of us.”

“We’re both in our fifth month,” Nia explained. “He’s two weeks older.”

“I come too,” said the heavily scarred man, his accent much thicker.

“He’s Raz, our mentor,” Io explained. “He killed a mangler while unarmed, to save our mother.”

“Tree,” said Ul, holding up three fingers. He pointed at Raz, scowling and clenching a fist, as if to suggest he was tough. Then he held a hand out toward the other two and moved the other hand like a jabbering mouth while rolling his eyes.

“Father!” Nia exclaimed, appalled.

“We sometimes talk too much,” Io apologized.

Ul spat some chattering syllables.

“We must wait until after dark for the boat,” Nia translated. “We should remain here for the present. He will send for some agreeable food.”

After many thanks had been expressed to Ul and his clan, the meeting ended. Nia and Io gravitated toward Corinne, Jason, and Rachel—perhaps because they appeared to be of a similar age. The conversation started slowly and politely, with Rachel and Jason explaining that they were Beyonders and Corinne explaining that she used to live in a swamp.

“You have interesting pasts,” Nia said. “I have never left these hills, though I’ve yearned to see the world.”

“You speak our language well,” Jason said. “Have you had a lot of practice?”

“Chiefly among my people,” Nia said. “Many among us endeavor to keep the tradition alive in the hope of future alliances.”

“We once met a messenger from Kadara who spoke with us,” Io said. “He wanted us to attack the army besieging the city of Highport. Father told him we



would send Kadara the same assistance in their hour of need as they sent us when we faced extinction.”

“Afterward, Father told us that if there had been any hope of success, he would have attacked,” Nia said. “Regardless of our past grievances, none of us are pleased to see Kadara fall and the emperor grow stronger.”

“I can’t believe you guys are five months old,” Jason said. “When I was five months old, I was a bald little baby who couldn’t do much more than cry.”

Io chuckled. “Our lives move at a different pace. Our parents begin teaching us the moment we are born. We never sleep. Our minds mature faster along with our bodies.”

“I was less than a month old when my mother discovered my aptitude for English,” Nia said. “It is why I was given such an extravagant name.”

“I was the same,” Io said. “In Ji, two syllables is a very long word.”

“We come from a long-lived line,” Nia explained. “We develop a touch slower, but we live longer than many drinlings. Some of our ancestors survived nearly three years.”

Rachel looked away.

Io touched her shoulder. “That sounds quick to you.”

“A little,” Rachel replied, not wanting to emphasize her discomfort. How unfair for them to live so briefly!

“I have heard that some outside our culture feel this way,” Io said. “You must understand, our lives feel sufficient to us. Does your life feel long enough? Eighty years?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I guess.”

Io smiled. He had a smile like his father. “Yet compare yourself to the Amar Kabal. If you tally their many lives, they could endure a hundred times longer than you. Or more. To them, your life seems fleeting. To you, our lives seem short.”

“To us, all of you live much too long,” Nia joked. “How tedious it must become!”

Rachel forced a smile. “I see what you mean. It’s all relative.” She still felt the wizard who had devised a two-year life span must have been terribly insensitive.

“Besides,” Io said, eyes twinkling, “we have some advantages. We never get ill. And we don’t have to wait for food!” He tore up a clump of weeds, put it in his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

“No way!” Jason said. “That won’t make you sick?”

“Our bodies consume a lot of energy,” Nia explained. “We need plenty of nourishment.” She shoved a palmful of dirt into her mouth.

Rachel winced. “Doesn’t it taste bad?”

“Not to us,” Io said. “It probably tastes bad to you because your body can’t use it.”

“Don’t you like normal food better?” Jason asked.

“Depends on what you call normal,” Nia said, biting off a portion of a dry twig, clearly enjoying how Jason cringed. Rachel could hear the twig snapping as Nia chewed. “Unlike many other cultures, we never cook our food.”

Io made a disgusted face. “Talk about ruining flavor.”

“The stick doesn’t hurt your teeth?” Corinne asked.

“Our teeth are tough,” Nia assured her.

“Okay, I’m a little jealous,” Jason admitted.

“Just wait a few months until you have to treat us as your elders,” Nia replied.

Rachel laughed along with the others, but the thought still made her a little sad.

## THE LAST INN

Jason leaned against the side of the ship, staring out at the rolling swells and the coast beyond, blue with distance. The scent of the salt on the air made him thirsty, and he took a sip from his waterskin. He tried not to think of poor Corinne, huddled at the back of the boat, unable to keep any food down.

After dizzying heights, blasting winds, and murderous zombies, the ocean voyage had been just what he needed to get his equilibrium back. He almost regretted that they would reach their destination tonight. He supposed he was relieved for Corinne's sake.

For almost a week this boat had represented the only safety he had really known since departing the Seven Vales. Long and narrow, with a dozen oars on each side and a big square sail, the drinling vessel had outpaced a variety of more elaborate ships manned by Kadarians.

Jason had watched the drinlings in awe that first night. A stocky people, they tended to have more muscle than height; they were broad through the shoulders, with long torsos and sturdy legs. They seemed to put all of their power into each stroke, but still found reserves for another and another and another. They didn't break to rest or to sleep. Only to eat and to drink.

Heaps of black tubers had crowded the boat at the outset of the voyage. Nia had explained that the dense tubers were a favorite among her people, due to their rich nutrients. Inedible to most living things, the rootlike growths flourished beneath the soil among the hills where the drinlings dwelled.

By sunrise on the first morning aboard the longboat, they had already passed beyond the estuary of the Silver River to the open sea. A surprising amount of the black tubers had already been consumed, and the drinlings showed no hesitation about washing them down with seawater. As they rowed, Jason watched the bodies of the drinlings adapt to the work, muscles thickening across backs and along arms, men and women alike. Rather than tiring out over time, the drinling rowers were growing stronger and more able.

The longboat was not designed for as many passengers as it presently carried, but the members of the delegation made the best of it. Sleeping was the worst part, huddled in cramped spaces while the rowers toiled through the night.

They had not been harassed by any imperial ships. Raz and Io had related that although Maldor had built an impressive navy in the western ocean, the emperor had made no effort to dominate the eastern waters. A navy had been essential to conquer the island nation of Meridon off the western coast, but as the eastern ocean held no such spoils, Maldor had opted to attack Kadara strictly by land.

Consequently, the Kadarian navy went unchallenged on the water. Unfortunately, this did little to help their besieged cities, except the capital, Inkala, which had docks shielded by massive city walls.

Ever since the drinlings had stopped fighting the emperor, the Kadarians had shown no love for them. But the Kadarian ships the delegation had encountered only made token efforts to harass them. Evidently the Kadarians had bigger problems on their hands.

Now, for the first time in five days, the prow of the boat turned diagonally toward the shoreline. Tark joined Jason, hairy forearms resting on the gunwale. "Back to land," he said in his gravelly voice. "No more fish."

"I had no idea you were such a fisherman," Jason remarked, glancing down at his friend. "You caught twice as many as anyone aboard."

"I worked the sea for a time," Tark answered simply.

"What haven't you done?" Jason asked. "You were a fisherman, a diver, a miner, a musician. What am I missing?"

"Cook," Tark said. "Soldier. Tradesman. Hedonist. Traitor. Those are the main ones."

"You need to go easier on yourself," Jason said.

"I've gone plenty easy often enough," Tark replied. "I appreciate the sentiment, Lord Jason, but I'll decide when my penance is done for turning my back on good causes. I've got too many comrades reprimanding me from their watery graves."

"What do you think we'll find back on land?" Jason asked.

"Nothing so terrible as what we faced in the Forsaken Kingdom, I hope," Tark said, hawking up phlegm and spitting over the side. "That business was the worst I ever want to see."

"I hear you," Jason agreed. "Thanks for watching my back through all of that."

“Thank Rachel,” Tark said.

“Good point.”

“I wouldn’t mind some bread,” Tark mused. “Been some time since we had any bread. We were spoiled in the Vales.”

“Will the Last Inn have good food?” Jason asked.

Tark rubbed his hands together. “Don’t torture me. I’ve never made it there, but the Last Inn has a reputation that spans Lyrian. That doesn’t happen without desirable fare.”

“How far from the Durnese River to the inn?”

“Just a day or two on foot, according to Raz.”

“Think Galloran will be there?”

“Hard thing to guess. I sure hope so. He’s had some time. Thanks to the speed of this ship, we’ll arrive more or less on schedule.”

Under the cover of darkness, the longboat entered the wide, slow Durnese River. Jason swatted at biting insects as he watched the banks glide by, grateful to be in motion without any personal effort. To either side of the vessel, beyond the flat water, bobbing fireflies twinkled amid ferny shrubs. The lukewarm air tasted humid, as if poised to condense into a rain cloud all around him, although the starry sky above was mostly clear.

At length, the longboat ran aground against a level bank of firm mud interspersed with puddles. Raz and other drinlings helped the delegation disembark. After nearly a week of backbreaking labor, the drinling rowers had swelled up like bodybuilders.

Without ceremony, Raz aided the drinlings as they shoved the longboat back into the water. The few vessels secreted near the Silver River were among the drinlings’ favorite assets, and the experienced crew wanted to reach the safety of the open sea by sunrise.

“This nearest of river to Last Inn,” Raz explained in uncertain English. “We have fresh legs. We walk.”

So Jason, Rachel, Farfalee, Nollin, Kerick, Drake, Ferrin, Tark, Nedwin, Aram, Nia, Io, and Raz hiked away from the river and soon came to a road. Aram cradled Corinne in his strong arms, as she remained too nauseated to walk. He seemed relieved to be on dry land. The half giant had patiently endured growing and shrinking aboard the longboat for all to see.

“This is a remote corner of Lyrian,” Ferrin said, falling into step beside Jason. “I’ve only made it this way once, and then simply out of curiosity.”

“You’ve been to the Last Inn?” Jason asked.

Ferrin nodded. “A massive structure. Maldor technically occupies this part of Lyrian, the former kingdoms of Durna and Hintop. But the area is sparsely populated, and since the emperor has not yet elected to engage any of the settlements within the southern jungle, little heed is paid to this southeastern portion of the continent.”

“How far is the Temple of Mianamon into the jungle?” Jason asked.

“Far enough to keep the emperor away for now,” Ferrin replied. “I’ve never entered the jungle. I’m not sure Lyrian has more perilous terrain. Forget the venomous snakes, poisonous plants, deadly insects, and impenetrable foliage. The wizard Certius left behind some ferocious races that Maldor has opted to leave unchallenged.”

“Certius was part of the big war with Zokar and Eldrin,” Jason said, remembering his lessons in history from the Repository of Learning.

“Good memory,” Ferrin said. “Zokar attacked Certius first, and suffered horrible losses to gain victory. Certius was killed, his races scattered, but the forces of Zokar never recovered sufficiently to stand up to Eldrin. None really know how much the races of Certius have recuperated. Certius and his creations never showed interest in venturing beyond the jungle. Historians believe that Zokar lost the war by engaging Certius prematurely. Had Zokar initially bested Eldrin instead, strategists argue he could have rebuilt his forces at his leisure before attacking Certius. Maldor participated in that conflict, and is a devoted student of history.”

“So you think Maldor will leave the southern jungle alone?” Jason asked.

“From what I’ve managed to gather, I believe the southern jungle is Maldor’s last priority, even after the Seven Vales. Which is why I never went there. The region was not particularly relevant, and unquestionably dangerous.”

“But some people visit the Temple of Mianamon,” Jason said. “Galloran went there.”

Ferrin nodded. “Formerly, many pilgrims went to Mianamon for advice from the oracles. A wide, stone road cut through the jungle, and the inhabitants of Mianamon welcomed visitors. The Last Inn thrived in those days.

“After the war with Zokar, none went to Mianamon for years. Word had it that the oracles had dwindled in number and in power. The jungle reclaimed the road. Only a few intrepid explorers, like Galloran, have ventured there since. The Last Inn became a curiosity mostly frequented by locals rather than the gateway to a mysterious society.”

“Well, you’ll finally get to see the jungle,” Jason said.

Ferrin rolled his eyes. “If I stick with you, there won’t be a deadly destination in Lyrian without my footprints.”

By sunrise, Corinne was able to walk. Raz kept them moving at a brisk pace. To amuse himself, Jason invented a game called Will Nia Eat It? The answer to the question was typically yes. She generally said no only to stone and metal. Mud, bugs, rags, leaves, rope, leather, dead mice, pinecones, hair, and thorny stems were all proven edible.

The Last Inn came into sight just after sundown, situated by a crossroads outside the palisade of a modest village. Portions of the sprawling inn reached five stories tall. Built of wood and stone, the huge structure featured endless gables and turrets, united by swooping sections of roof that came together at unusual angles. Plentiful balconies and rooftop terraces added layers to the rambling inn, and a variety of chimney pots, cupolas, and weather vanes provided character. Large stables adjoined one side of the building, next to a working smithy.

“Looks like you could fit more people in the inn than the village,” Corinne said in wonder.

“Once, you certainly could,” Farfalee said. “Now much of the inn is permanently vacant. The Last Inn has been owned by the same family for generations. During the good years, they put much of their income toward adding to it.”

They entered the common room through a great set of double doors. The cavernous space was three stories high, with thick rafters and an assortment of magnificent trophy heads on the walls. Fires blazed in multiple hearths. Dozens of patrons sat at long tables, dining on a variety of fragrant foods, yet the room was barely filled to a quarter of its capacity. A long marble bar against one wall blocked access to the two largest mirrors Jason had ever seen, set inside elaborate frames. A thin man in the corner sawed at his fiddle, to the approval of those seated nearby.

Jason smiled. Despite the exaggerated size, the room felt warm and lively, and the prospect of hot food boosted his spirits. Several curious heads turned as the delegation entered, and a stout woman in a frilly white cap approached hurriedly, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Welcome, travelers,” she gushed. “I’m Angela; call me Angie. I don’t believe I’ve seen many of these faces before! Welcome, leave your cares at the door, and come inside for food and drink! Do you have horses?”

“No horses,” Nedwin said. “We were told to ask for Clayton.”

Her face fell. “Clayton, the owner, of course. I’m sorry you missed him. He rarely ventures abroad, but he is gone for the next several days. Many apologies if you are friends of his.”

“You have rooms?” Farfalee asked.

“Rooms? We have more rooms than we know what to do with!”

“We’d like to stay together,” Nedwin said.

“Easily arranged,” she replied cheerily.

“Has anyone asked after a group from the north,” Farfalee wondered. “Perhaps a blind traveler?”

Angie scowled and placed her hands on her hips. “Travelers we still get, but no blind ones of late. From the north, you say? I’ll keep vigilant.”

Jason let his attention wander from the conversation as Farfalee and Nedwin discussed the arrangements. They had brought plenty of money from the Seven Vales, so cost would not be an issue. They had planned to be ready to completely outfit themselves here if necessary before heading into the jungle.

“Big inn,” Rachel commented beside Jason.

“Congratulations,” he replied. “You just won the understatement award.”

“Think about it from the outside,” Rachel said. “It covers more ground than a city block.”

He leaned close to her. “I hope they use a lot of chlorine in the pool. Have you looked around? Some of these other customers don’t look very sanitary.”

She swatted him with the back of her hand. “It’s just nice to see people. Normal people having a good time.”

“You’ll take that over dead people trying to eat us?”

“Just this once.”

The delegation sat together along opposing benches at a long table. A parade of toasty, wholesome food kept them busy. Nothing seemed particularly fancy, but everything tasted hearty and good. Tark saluted Jason with a dark hunk of bread slathered with melting butter. Even Corinne managed to eat with enthusiasm.

The weight of the meal magnified Jason’s weariness exponentially. He could hardly drag himself up the stairs with the others when the time came. He ended up sharing a room with Nedwin and Ferrin, and hastily claimed one of the three cots by flopping down unceremoniously.

The room was a bit cramped, but clean and solid, with a single window looking out at a slanted section of roof. The simple cot felt heavenly after days



of sleeping on the ground or huddled on the creaking boards of a longboat. Stomach full, muscles weary, he contentedly settled in for a delicious slumber. He felt truly happy and comfortable for the first time in weeks.

In retrospect, he probably should have guessed it was a trap.

The soldiers burst into his room at dawn. Jason barely had time to awaken before he was flung to the floor beside Ferrin. He felt cheated of any opportunity to react as the sole of a boot pressed his head against the floorboards and a heavy knee weighed on his back. Within moments, biting cords bound his wrists together.

As Jason staggered to his feet with help from a conscriptor, he noticed that Nedwin was gone. The cot beside the window had no bedding on it. He deliberately avoided staring at the inexplicably empty cot. While other soldiers continued to bind Ferrin, the conscriptor brusquely steered Jason out into the hallway, where other soldiers awaited.

Two doors down, Raz burst from a room, the spike at the end of his arm buried in a soldier. Other soldiers mobbed the scarred warrior. With swift, lethal movements, Raz slashed open another soldier, and a third, before succumbing to multiple stab wounds. The soldiers brutally made sure that Raz would never rise again.

“Move,” the conscriptor growled at Jason, tugging him toward the stairs. Kerick lay on his side in the hall, body pierced by arrows, an empty socket gaping at the base of his skull. Jason stumbled along on numb feet, shocked to see other members of the delegation being escorted from their rooms, hands bound behind their backs. Nollin. Tark. Tiny Aram. Had the soldiers moved in before daybreak, they would have had a much different Aram to deal with. Perhaps they had known that.

The conscriptor manhandled Jason down the stairs to the huge common room, which stood empty now except for uniformed soldiers. Dozens of them. Too many.

Jason knelt between Nollin and Drake. He watched Corinne being led down the stairs, then Io, then Farfalee. Rachel entered the room gagged. Ferrin had to be carried because he had been bound inside of a sack that covered all but his head.

Jason tried to make sense of Nedwin’s absence. Why was his bedding gone? Had he slipped out much earlier? Did he get away, or had he been the traitor?

After the entire delegation—minus Kerick, Nedwin, and Raz—had been assembled on the common room floor, kneeling in two rows, Duke Conrad entered the room. Jason felt an instant jolt of recognition and surprise. He looked much like Jason remembered him from Harthenham, except his prominent nose had clearly been reset imperfectly after Jason had broken it, and he was perhaps a tad leaner. Otherwise his skin was deeply tanned, his posture erect, his hair slicked back, his princely uniform impeccable, boots polished, medals gleaming. He wore a controlled expression of bemused disdain, as if this moment had been inevitable, and he was quietly pleased to watch his enemies arriving at that realization.

“This did not prove half so troublesome as I had been led to believe,” he finally said, pacing before his prisoners. “You have led many others on a merry chase across the continent. While some asked where you were, and others wondered where you would be next, I stopped and asked myself where you would ultimately go. And I went there. And I waited.” He grinned, showing his teeth. “And here we are.”

“And you can release me at once,” Ferrin said.

“Can I?” Conrad asked politely. “I understood that you were wanted along with the rest.”

“It’s what I do,” Ferrin responded tiredly. “I infiltrate the enemy. You know that. This interrupts the operation for me. Ideally I would have prolonged the arrangement until after Mianamon, but perhaps this is for the best. They have been creating quite a stir.”

“You have been spying all along,” Conrad said, unconvinced. “The manhunt for you was a ruse.”

“Check with the emperor,” Ferrin replied coolly.

For the first time in a while, Jason doubted Ferrin. He suddenly examined the displacer through new eyes. Could Ferrin be trying to fool Conrad? Or had Ferrin expertly fooled the rest of them all along? *A lie twice believed is self-deceived.* The thought stirred a smoldering anger deep inside.

“That will not take long,” said a man in the corner, studiously picking at a fingernail with a small knife. He raised his head, wavy gray hair framing his pallid face. He wore a long coat of brown leather.

“Torvic!” Ferrin called, the exuberance hollow. “I hadn’t seen you over there. Still in touch directly with Felrook? You know, to come clean, I haven’t brought Maldor in on my plan yet, so it might be of little use to bother him at this juncture.”

“We’ll be in touch with the emperor soon enough,” Conrad assured him. “Keep talking, traitor, and every word will cost you.” Conrad swept his eyes over the group, then let his gaze linger on Jason.

“Want to go two out of three?” Jason asked, unable to resist. Conrad’s eyes and jaw hardened at the insolence. The posture of his body suggested he was about to lash out. It was fun to see the words elicit a reaction. “There has to be a billiard table somewhere in a place this big.”

“I am no longer a gentleman of rank and title,” Conrad murmured, the soft words laced with hatred. “We common soldiers have different methods for settling grievances.”

“You were stripped of your office?” Drake asked. “Well, I suppose you *did* botch the easiest job in the empire. I see the emperor let you keep your medals.”

Conrad turned slowly to face Drake. “I see a seedman without a seed. A pathetic laughingstock who will suffer enough for all his other lifetimes combined before his fading spark is finally extinguished. I am ecstatic that we have crossed paths again.”

“But not half so glad as you should be to see Lord Jason,” Drake insisted congenially. “You never got to thank him for sparing your life after he defeated you.”

Conrad bowed stiffly, a vein throbbing in his forehead, then turned to Jason. “You lured me into an absurd duel, bested me, and spared me. It was no kindness. I lost everything. Through the triumph of this day, I shall regain all I lost, and more. I expected no mercy from you, and you should expect none from me. You and your companions will promptly be delivered to Felrook.”

“You spared him?” Io blurted incredulously, looking to Jason.

Conrad regarded Io and Nia with a sneer. “Drinlings should not attract attention. You vermin should be summarily executed. It’s the only way to deal with inhuman pests. But the emperor requested that as many of this party be taken alive as possible, and I have no intention of tarnishing the glory of my victory.”

“The Amar Kabal will not stand for this,” Nollin warned, no confidence backing his words.

Conrad shifted his attention to Farfalee and Nollin. “It is the emperor who will not stand for your open involvement against him, in direct defiance of his treaty with your people. Have the two of you considered that you could be prisoners of Felrook forever, lifetime after lifetime, awakening after each death with a fresh body ready for new torments? I have.” He sneered, eyes roving.

“Does anyone else wish to speak? The exiled princess of Trensicourt, perhaps? The diminutive giant? The ridiculous little musician?”

Rachel tried to mumble something through her gag.

Conrad grinned. “Ah, yes, the Beyonder witch. Do not fear, the emperor is most intrigued with you. He will have many questions.” He snapped his fingers. “But the Beyonder Jason will have the honor of the first private conversation. Torvic?”

The gray-haired displacer came forward, casually using a cane. A pair of soldiers hauled Jason to his feet and escorted him from the common room, through the quiet kitchen to a small storage area where three wooden chairs awaited. The soldiers departed, leaving Jason alone with Conrad and Torvic.

“Are you contacting him?” Conrad asked.

“This may require some time,” Torvic answered, closing his eyes.

Jason stared at Conrad. “How did you know we would come here?”

“It might be best for you to keep silent until spoken to,” Conrad murmured.

“Come on, you got us, it’s over—how’d you know?”

Conrad narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t know. Not for certain. In truth, I was beginning to doubt my instincts, it took you so long. I had to beg for involvement in the hunt, to atone for my errors. I was tempted to chase you like the others. In the end I merely put myself in your position. To really incite rebellion this late in the war, you would need hope, and authority, and guidance, so sooner or later you would seek the oracle.”

“You just came here and waited,” Jason said.

“The inn boasts plenty of space,” Conrad said. “We occupied a rearward wing. I took the innkeeper hostage. Clayton’s family became very cooperative afterward. I brought fifty men. I lost three. Many others with more resources could not match my accomplishment. But I’m a soldier and a hunter. I rose to my former position on merit, as I shall rise again, and continue to rise.”

“What’s taking Torvic so long?” Jason asked.

“The emperor is a busy man,” Conrad said dryly. “Torvic has kept me in touch with Felrook. We learned much before Nedwin discovered his ear. It is how I knew to attack at dawn and avoid the half giant. We waited outside your hall all night, poised to strike. You were weary. You rested past sunrise. A lone seedman stood guard in the hall. How we missed Nedwin, I’m not sure. He somehow slipped away. We’re looking; we’ll find him. But he is a small matter compared to the big game we acquired.”

“I have Maldor,” Torvic said abruptly. “I am his eyes, ears, and mouth. I speak his words. Congratulations, Conrad.”

“Thank you, sire,” Conrad said, bowing his head.

“Torvic informed me who you apprehended. Bring them to Felrook and not only will all of your holdings and titles be reinstated, you will select your next assignment.”

“You are too generous, sire,” Conrad said. “We’ll add troops from the nearest garrison. The prisoners will travel to Felrook with an army as escort.”

“I am pleased.” Torvic turned to regard Jason. “Lord Jason.”

“Can you see me?” Jason asked.

“I can.”

“How? You’re not a displacer.”

“No.”

“But Torvic shares parts with a displacer.”

“Torvic exchanged an eye and an ear with a displacer called Gobrick. And I can read Gobrick’s mind, borrowing his sight and hearing.” Torvic turned to Conrad. “Leave us.”

Conrad exited the room.

“You were a fool to return,” Maldor said through Torvic.

“Return?” Jason asked as if confused.

“I know you made it home to the Beyond,” Maldor said. “I know Ferrin aided you. There is nothing for you here. You were free.”

“I left somebody behind.”

“Rachel. You have character, Jason. Tell me about her abilities.”

Jason scrunched his eyebrows. “Let’s see. She has heat vision and super speed and bulletproof skin and ESP and a lasso that makes you tell the truth and—”

“Do you really believe this is a wise time for flippancy? If you do not value your own welfare, consider your companions. I have little interest in many of them.”

“Sorry,” Jason said, fear for his friends making his stomach drop.

“I am not going to extend another offer for you to join me.”

“Then why are we talking?”

“Mostly I wanted to see your face. You have been elusive. I wanted to be sure. Also, I thought you might be interested to know that Galloran has finally knelt to me. He is now my creature. With your capture, the rebellion is officially over.”

Jason scowled. Galloran had knelt to Maldor? What did that mean exactly?

“Alas, we will not speak again,” Maldor went on. “I am much more interested in Rachel. Congratulations on causing me more trouble than I expected. Unfortunately, your return to Lyrian was inevitably a return to my dungeons. So much for high ideals. So much for character. You may depart. Tell Conrad to fetch the girl.”

# FOREIGN EYES

Conrad sat Rachel down across from Torvic and remained beside her. Rachel disliked the close confines of the cluttered little storeroom.

“Rachel,” Maldor said through Torvic with a fatherly smile. “I have longed to meet you. I wish we could speak in person, but all in due time. Please trust that I can see you clearly and hear every word. I understand through my agents that you possess some talent with Edomic. If we remove the gag, we will trust you to hold a civilized conversation. Should you betray that trust, three of your comrades will immediately perish. Do you understand?”

She nodded. Torvic glanced at Conrad, who removed the gag and then ducked out of the storeroom.

“Better?” Maldor asked.

“I guess.” She tried to calm down and think. When Conrad had returned Jason to the common room and separated her from the others, Rachel had demanded bravery from herself. But now, seated across from a displacer who was speaking the words of a distant emperor, she wasn’t sure what bravery required. Did bravery demand she ignore him? Would the bravest plan be to deny whatever he asked? Or was bravery doing whatever she felt would best protect her friends? Could bravery mean pretending she would cooperate with him? “What now?”

“Tell me how you came to Lyrian,” Maldor prompted through his puppet.

Rachel glared at him. Even though this wasn’t really Maldor, she felt tempted to command objects in the storeroom to sail at his head. She didn’t want to reveal anything to him. He didn’t deserve to know her story.

“Come now,” he said. “I understand you feel cross with me. I don’t blame you. But I will only remain cordial to an extent. I won’t harm you just yet. Think of your friends. Talk to me.”

Boiling inside, she told about the butterfly and the stone archway. She explained about meeting the Blind King and Jason. She related some of her adventures, all the while trying to avoid incriminating her friends.

“You never chose to come here,” Maldor eventually summarized. “You never even really chose to resist me. Yet here we sit, enemies by circumstance. I imagine you would like to see your parents again.”

“More than anything,” Rachel confessed. Was it wrong to reveal that? It might make him sympathize with her. Was he capable of sympathy?

“Tell me how you discovered your aptitude for Edomic,” Maldor invited.

She paused. This was a dangerous subject. He didn’t want anyone using Edomic. She could get people in trouble. What did he want to hear?

“I know you have skill with Edomic,” Maldor said. “Be forthright. If we can come to an understanding, you may save your friends a great deal of suffering.”

Rachel explained how she first learned to ignite fires. Instead of naming Drake, she claimed she had learned from a stranger in the woods. She told how Chandra had taught her to move objects, because Chandra was dead and Maldor couldn’t harm her. Rachel admitted that the more she practiced, the more will she could force into her commands.

“How do you feel when you execute an Edomic command?” Maldor asked, the eyes of his puppet watching her intently.

“Good,” she said. He watched in silence. “Really good. More alive. It’s hard to describe.”

“No description necessary,” Maldor said. “I know precisely what you mean.” He regarded her quietly. “I have wavered of late in my opinion of Edomic adepts. Someday, perhaps far in the future, I may regret not having an heir. Do I really wish to see my knowledge perish with me? Show me what you can do. Move something in the room.”

Rachel hesitated, trying to strategize. Should she downplay her abilities? She could try to make a tiny Edomic command seem challenging. Or would it be more advantageous if Maldor thought she had real potential? If he was looking for a possible heir, the latter might be the case. Then again, he might only have mentioned an heir to fool her.

“Just use your talent,” Maldor encouraged. “Show me. You’ve been captured. Your friends have been captured. Your only leverage is my interest in you. If you have a gift for speaking Edomic, I assure you that my interest will increase.”

She looked around the room. A wooden cask roughly the size of a watermelon caught her eye. She issued a terse command that sent it crashing up into the ceiling. The cask fell heavily back to the floor, cracking without fully rupturing.



Conrad burst into the room, sword in hand. Torvic held up a palm to stop him. "I asked for a demonstration of her Edomic abilities," Maldor explained. Conrad nodded and withdrew.

The displacer puppet turned his attention back to Rachel. "Impressive. The cask did not appear light, and you handled it with ease. You have come a long way in a short while. Tell me, how large of a fire can you ignite spontaneously?"

"At least the size of a person," Rachel answered.

"Interesting. What else can you do? I know you spent time with the charm woman."

"I can influence animals."

"Many accomplished wizards never master that ability. I would like you to try an exercise." He shared with her the Edomic command to summon water out of the air, and the command to hold it in the form of the sphere. "Then you can call heat to make the water boil. Try it, please."

Rachel asked him to repeat the commands, which he did. Mustering her willpower, she spoke the first command, trying to envision the water particles all around her, an invisible mist. As she felt the water responding, she spoke the second command, visualizing where she wanted the water to gather. Soon a sphere of water just smaller than a racquetball hovered between her and Torvic. While using her will to hold the sphere in place, she summoned heat until the water steamed and boiled. Once the water reached a boil, it became indefinably slippery, fell, and splattered against the floor.

When the water hit the floor, Rachel let out an exhausted breath. It had taken all of her focus to hold the water together. She felt like she had set down a heavy weight.

"I am very impressed," Maldor said. "You have never gathered water from the air before?"

Rachel shook her head. "Never."

"You have real promise," Maldor mused. "Beguiling potential. Of course, it would require centuries of extensive tutelage and hard work if you were to approach that potential. But over time you could develop into a sorceress of formidable abilities. How would you like to live for a thousand years and uncover secrets mortal man has never known to wonder about?"

"That sounds interesting," she said, partly intrigued, mostly trying not to offend.

"The secrets of Edomic are lost to Lyrian," Maldor said. "I am the last custodian of that knowledge. I am the only one left who can teach you. And you

may be the most worthy student I will ever encounter. You could be a terrible threat to me. My survival instincts warn me to crush you in your infancy. To help you develop would be to repeat the tragic folly of wizards past. Yet how awful to lose all of that promise! Adepts have become so rare. You are young and innocent. If we could strike the proper arrangement, complete with certain safeguards, this could evolve into a mutually beneficial relationship. How determined are you to return home?"

"I really want to," Rachel said frankly. "I worry about my parents. They probably think I'm dead."

"Would you walk away from the potential to become a wizard of universal renown, profound knowledge, and unfathomable power simply to see your parents? Would you walk away from centuries of meaningful life for decades of mediocrity? I know firsthand that Edomic does not function in the Beyond. Here you could be extraordinary. There you won't be nearly so exceptional."

Rachel considered the question. Maldor was evil, so to learn from him might mean forsaking everything she was. But what if the alternative was death? And what if she could strike a bargain to save her friends? Did part of her want to use the excuse of saving her friends as an excuse to gain knowledge and power?

"You've been to the Beyond?" Rachel asked, hoping to stall.

"I have. Among other things, it is where I hid after Zokar fell."

"Really? How long were you there?"

"Lyrian and the Beyond are growing apart," Maldor said. "They have been for millennia. Eventually there will be no way left to cross from one to the other. It is impossible to ascertain when that day will come. The passage of time does not always correspond between our realities. A year here might be ten there. A year there might be a hundred here. The ratio is inconstant. You may go home and find yourself wandering your world decades before you were born, or a thousand years in the future. I once spent a few days in the Beyond, and hundreds of years passed here in the interim."

"But Jason went home and came back pretty close in time," Rachel said.

"As I mentioned, the passage of time between our realities is inconstant," Maldor said. "On my first excursion to the Beyond, the passage of time matched up precisely."

"I might never see my parents again," Rachel realized with despair that seemed to sink into her bones. "Even if I get home, it might not be home anymore."

“Whereas here you could become an ageless sorceress of incomprehensible power. You could make Lyrian into your personal paradise. You could make it a paradise for all who live here. But to do so, you would need to stay. And you would need to learn.”

Rachel stared away from the gray-haired puppet speaking for Maldor. This new information changed everything. Could he be lying? What if he wasn't? What if she went home to a future where pollution had wiped out all life? What if she went home to a past where she would be mistreated? What if home became even more foreign than Lyrian? How would it feel to give a simple Edomic command and get no response? Here she had made friends. Here she was discovering powers.

Her eyes returned to Torvic, her mind to Maldor. “What about my friends?”

“Everything would depend on our arrangement,” Maldor replied. “I have never truly negotiated with the weak or the foolish. You are neither. I have given you much to consider. Take some time. If you do not join me, I will not torture you. I will not keep you imprisoned. You are too dangerous. I will kill you. Your friends I will torture, unless you, perhaps, intervene. Consider your fate. Ponder theirs. Be wise. This is no game. Lives and destinies are at stake. We will converse in person soon enough. Please tell Conrad that I would like to speak with Farfalee.”

And the conversation was over.

The gray-haired man stood and opened the storeroom door. Rachel overheard him relaying that Maldor wished to speak to Farfalee. He was no longer speaking as Maldor. He was Torvic again.

Conrad replaced her gag and led her with a hand on her elbow. Rachel felt dazed as she returned to the others in the common room. Jason looked concerned. She tried to smile. Something about the attempt only made him look more concerned.

*Are you all right?* Corinne inquired tentatively.

*Not really,* Rachel conveyed. *I think I will be. We'll see.*

When Jason had been captured, Maldor had offered him a job. There had been strings attached, of course. Jason had denied him, although it had meant imprisonment and torture.

But would Jason have made the same choice if he hadn't been captured alone? What if by accepting the offer, he could have saved his friends?

Rachel did not want to die. She didn't want her friends to suffer and die. But she didn't want to become evil either. She didn't want to work for a monster.

What could Maldor teach her? How powerful could she become? What if she learned enough to betray Maldor and free her friends? What if she bided her time and eventually overthrew him? Was that wishful thinking?

She tried not to picture her parents. Since arriving in Lyrian, the hope of finding a way home had kept her going. Now she knew that even if she found a way home, it might not get her back to her family. She might end up trapped in the wrong time. She might wish she had never left Lyrian. She would probably have no way back.

Rachel tried to be pragmatic. Eventually she would have grown up and left the nest. She would have become busy with college and work. She probably would have started her own family at some point. Maybe coming to Lyrian was like leaving the nest a little early. With less visitation. What if Maldor didn't exist? Could she build a life here?

But of course Maldor was part of the equation. How long would it take to reach Felrook? She would soon be faced with the toughest choice of her life. A choice that could end her life and the lives of her friends. A choice that could ruin her life, maybe even her soul. She wished none of this were happening. She wished she could stop thinking.

After a time, Farfalee returned to the common room, and Ferrin departed with Conrad for an interview. Rachel sat in silence, watching as the grim-faced soldiers tried to ignore their prisoners while also watching over them.

Words intruded on her thoughts without warning. *I need your eyes. Look around the room. Concentrate on sending the details to me.*

*Galloran?*

*We'll get you out. It has to be now. Maldor will send more guards. He knows that to take you will end the war. Who is left?*

Rachel tried to keep her expression casual as she glanced around the common room. The cavernous space comfortably accommodated dozens of guards. So many! She focused on sending everything she saw to Galloran's mind. *They killed Kerick. And Raz, one of the three drinlings who joined us. And Nedwin disappeared.*

*I see what you're sending. You're all bound. Stay low. Keep your head. This will have to be messy.*

*She felt a small surge of hope. How many are with you?*

*Three. See you inside.*

And Galloran was no longer in her mind. Rachel's eyes roved the room. Three besides Galloran? How could such a small group take on fifty? She should

warn the others. But she was gagged.

*Corinne?*

*He's coming, Corinne answered. He doesn't want me to say anything until it starts. He says the attack needs to be a complete surprise.*

The front door to the common room opened slowly. A stooped old man in a cloak toddled inside, tapping his way with a cane. A grimy rag bound his eyes.

"Inn's closed," said a soldier near the door. "Who let you in?"

"I always eat here midmorning," replied a raspy voice belligerently. "They give me fish."

The soldier who had spoken walked toward the hunched figure. "Not today, codger. Imperial business. Out you go."

The old man tore the blindfold away, dropped the walking stick, and drew a sleek sword that gleamed like a mirror. The same motion that produced the blade delivered a lethal slash to the unprepared soldier.

Rachel started with a gasp, partly because of the sudden attack, partly because Galloran had eyes: one brown, the other blue. Three soldiers died before anyone had weapons ready. Once the soldiers reacted, it made little difference.

Rachel had never seen anyone move like Galloran. He tended to dodge attacks rather than deflect them. He did not duck or twist an inch more than necessary to make his adversary miss. After each errant blow, Galloran ended the opponent with a quick stroke and moved on. His subtle feints were just enough to prompt lethal mistakes. His expression of quiet certainty was much more intimidating than ferocious scowls or shouted threats. When it was necessary to redirect a sword or spear, he expended just enough effort to frustrate the strike, and then hastily dispatched the attacker. Every thrust, every stride, every parry was measured and precise. No effort was wasted. Somehow he managed to avoid most of the fighting and skip straight to the killing blows.

It was a hypnotizing dance. Rachel had never imagined such concise and deadly motion, such calm focus amid turmoil. Neither had Galloran's enemies. All who drew near were slain with ruthless efficiency. No armor could slow the gleaming blade. Helmets parted. Chain mail was pierced. Galloran never paused. Every moment of combat seemed choreographed in his favor. And he was not alone.

Dorsio burst through the door with a crossbow in each hand, just after Galloran drew his sword. The nimble bodyguard produced a second pair of smaller crossbows after dropping guards near the prisoners. Once those quarrels

had been launched, he went to work near Galloran, a knife in each hand. Whenever he threw one, a replacement instantly materialized, pulled from within his cloak.

When a seedman burst through a nearby window, Rachel thought it was Lodan at first. After a moment, she recognized that it was Jasher, looking much younger than she remembered. He didn't enter with crossbows.

He brought orantium.

Jasher hurled the first sphere across the room to a corner where a group of soldiers had previously stood huddled in conversation. They now had weapons out, but seemed uncertain about where to employ them. The mineral gleamed a blinding white before a deafening explosion thundered through the room. Soldiers took flight, splintered chairs and tables filled the air, and heat washed over Rachel.

The second sphere landed near the bar with similar results. Other explosions boomed upstairs and outside, accompanied by hoarse shouts and the shattering of glass.

Guards who had been initially frozen with disbelief now seemed overwhelmed by the sudden devastation. Swords were raised uncertainly as confused soldiers sought to assess the greatest threat. To an extent their numbers worked against them. Most men seemed to expect another to solve the problem, but nobody was getting the job done. Those who rushed Galloran were cut down by an expertise that rendered their best efforts woefully incompetent. Those who hung back or sought cover became targets for orantium. Jasher seemed to have an endless supply.

The same initial shock that had temporarily incapacitated many of the guards had also frozen Rachel. She suddenly noticed that her companions were huddling together, trying to keep out of the way. Corinne had knocked over a long table that offered some shelter. Rachel mouthed some words against her gag, speaking more with her mind than her voice. The command tipped four tables and dragged them into position to form a crude fort around the bound captives.

Nedwin vaulted down the stairs, a long knife in one hand, a sphere of orantium in the other. Apparently he had been responsible for the repeated explosions above. A gash on his forehead sheeted his face with blood, but his eyes were alert. He threw the orantium sphere and raced to the fort of tables, deftly cutting his way past a pair of conscriptors to get there.

He went straight to Rachel, parting her gag without slicing her skin, then freeing her wrists with a second quick movement. He moved to Drake next. Rachel dimly realized she had been freed first because Nedwin felt she could make the biggest difference.

She scanned the room. By necessity, Jasher was now defending himself with his sword rather than hurling orantium. She had seen him fight before, and he had seemed incredible, and he was fighting well today, but compared to Galloran he appeared inefficient. Three guards had taken up a position behind the bar and were getting ready to use their crossbows. A sharp command from Rachel brought one of the huge mirrors down on top of them.

On the other side of the room, not far from the entrance, many of the remaining soldiers were pressing toward Galloran and Dorsio. Galloran fought with the same skill and exuberance as when he had first entered the room, but Dorsio had an arrow in his back and a gruesome wound in his side. As he stood between Galloran and two enemies, Rachel watched a sword skewer the silent bodyguard.

Fury flooded through her, and with a shouted command, a nearby table flipped sideways and rammed the two assailants into the wall. With a fresh Edomic command she set the entire table aflame and then sent it hurtling across the room, crashing against soldiers like a demonic bulldozer.

Rachel felt a thrill as the ambitious commands worked, but the exertion left her feeling like she had sprinted a mile uphill. She fell to one knee and tried to stay conscious.

The flaming table had helped break the soldiers. Drake had joined the fight now, and Tark, Farfalee, Jason, Io, and Aram seized weapons from fallen enemies as soon as Nedwin cut them free. The soldiers were no longer trying to win. They were trying to escape.

Rachel crouched behind an overturned table, trying to get her breath back, trying to stop the room from spinning, hoping that some scurrying soldier wouldn't stumble across her in this weakened state. She smelled burning wood. She was unsure how much time had passed when Nedwin helped her to her feet, the wound on his forehead bound with her former gag. She began to cough. Smoke billowed everywhere. The inn was on fire. Nedwin hurriedly escorted her to the road. Most of the others were already outside.

Drake and Ferrin exited the inn, their swords to the backs of Conrad and Torvic. A few other soldiers, who had apparently surrendered, knelt in the street, minded by Tark, Jasher, and Farfalee. Rachel overheard Drake telling

Nedwin that he had found Ferrin in the storeroom, restraining Conrad with his arms and Torvic with his legs. Ferrin explained that he had quietly unbound himself inside the sack and then attacked his interviewers when he heard the commotion. Drake took Kerick's seed from Conrad.

Galloran strode out of the inn, cradling Dorsio in his arms. He laid the lifeless body gently on the street. It was still morning. Flames leaped from several of the upper windows of the inn. Smoke leaked into the otherwise clear sky.

Galloran came to stand before the new prisoners, regarding them stormily. Rachel realized that the mismatched eyes had been a deliberate insult. The glaring discrepancy emphasized that his vision had been restored by displacers. "Do you surrender to us?" Galloran asked.

The prisoners responded in the affirmative. Except for Conrad.

"I will not surrender," Conrad said stiffly. "I was disgracefully withheld from combat. It was my right to face my adversaries. I must have satisfaction."

"Let me," Drake said.

"Galloran," Conrad demanded. "I challenge Galloran to a duel."

"Swords?" Galloran asked.

"Naturally."

"Now?"

"Immediately," Conrad responded.

"Very well," Galloran said.

"No!" Farfalee protested.

"He's not a duke anymore," Jason complained.

"He has a reputation with a sword," Ferrin warned.

"Let me have him," Jasher begged.

"He accepted," Conrad insisted.

"I did," Galloran said. "Arm him."

"I have his sword," Ferrin said. Galloran nodded, and Ferrin reluctantly handed the weapon to Conrad.

"If I best you, I go free," Conrad stipulated.

"Agreed," Galloran said. "You lost a duel to Lord Jason. He left you with your life. I will show no such kindness."

"I have won eleven mortal duels," Conrad said. "The one I lost was a farce fought with billiard balls. I have heard tales of your prowess with a blade. In my experience, most tales grow with the telling."



Rachel overheard Jason murmuring to Jasher. "Conrad hasn't seen him fight."

Galloran backed away into the street, and Conrad stepped toward him. Galloran drew his sword.

"A remarkable blade," Conrad conceded.

"Begin?" Galloran asked.

"Begin." Conrad edged forward, sword ready.

Their blades touched twice before Conrad was impaled. Galloran withdrew his sword and wiped it clean while Conrad expired in the road, a stain spreading across his white uniform. Rachel could not suppress a quick, involuntary laugh of relief. She heard beams collapsing inside the inn. Sparks gusted from some of the windows.

Then Galloran became very still. He slowly turned to look down the road. Rachel felt no premonition of her own, but the expression on Galloran's face gave her chills. She followed his gaze. A figure was approaching, still a long distance away. A black silhouette bearing a shining sword in each hand. A living shadow defying the morning light. A torivor.

"This adversary has come for me," Galloran said, his voice heavy and resigned. "I believe it followed me from Felrook. I did not know it had brought swords. Keep back. Unless you attack, it can only claim one victim like this. If I fall, proceed to the Temple of Mianamon with haste."

They watched in silence as the torivor drew near. It did not hurry. The swords it carried matched Galloran's perfectly, superbly crafted, chromium bright.

"We do not have to cross swords!" Galloran called throatily. "I have no quarrel with your kind. Depart in peace."

The lurker showed no indication of having heard. The steady tread did not falter until the creature stopped ten paces from Galloran. The torivor tossed one of the swords. Galloran caught it by the hilt. He now held an identical sword in each hand.

"Very well," Galloran said, perhaps answering words the others could not hear. Rachel could vaguely sense communication. She strained her mind to understand, but could catch nothing. She fingered the necklace the charm woman had given her, realizing that it must be causing interference.

Galloran waited placidly. The lurker stood still as well. Until it rushed forward with otherworldly speed and its sword scythed outward in a hissing arc. Galloran narrowly blocked the attack, and the next stroke, and the next.

The blades did not clash or clang as they connected—they chimed musically, beautifully, like a battle fought with expensive tuning forks. Rachel could almost feel the vibrations.

It did not take Rachel long to see that Galloran would lose this fight. The torivor was clearly quicker and stronger. Only by moving with flawless economy was Galloran able to deflect the relentless blows. Rachel suddenly understood where Galloran had learned to fight so efficiently. It was the only way he could have previously survived combat with an opponent such as this.

Rachel held her breath. Any moment Galloran would make a tiny mistake and lose his life. Even with two swords—one used primarily to protect himself, the other to attack—he was only barely staying ahead of the lurker. No thrust or slash from Galloran came close to touching the tenebrous surface of the torivor. The only question seemed to be how long Galloran would last.

The blades flashed in the sunlight. Heat radiated from the burning inn. Galloran slowly retreated, his breathing becoming labored. Any moment the torivor's sword would slip past his defenses. Except it didn't.

Rachel had never envisioned such virtuosity with a weapon. It was like watching a concert pianist play an impossible piece of music, fingers flying to strike mind-boggling patterns of notes and to pound sprawling chords. No, it was more than that. It was like watching that pianist play an impossible piece with dynamite strapped to his back, rigged to detonate if he touched a wrong note.

The frantic blur of motion was almost too quick to follow. Before Rachel could feel nervous about any particular blow, it had been blocked, a counterstroke had been parried, and the blades chimed on.

Galloran was no longer giving ground. The combatants slowly circled each other, swords ringing relentlessly. Galloran looked determined, his eyes fierce with concentration. The lurker fell into a pattern of swinging high, forcing Galloran to defend his head, then lashing out with a shadowy leg to kick Galloran in the side.

A blade blurred down and took the black leg off just below the knee. The severed portion disappeared with a brilliant flash. Whiteness gleamed from the stump, as if the torivor were bleeding light. The fight continued, with the torivor clearly wavering. A moment later, Galloran cast aside one of his swords.

Single sword against single sword, the blades met over and over. Perfectly balanced on its remaining leg, the torivor was now defending as often as attacking. Galloran's face was red and perspiring. They seemed to be standing

too close together. And then Galloran's blade sliced through the torivor's midsection, and the creature vanished with a blinding flash.

As Rachel blinked away the dazzling afterimage, she saw Galloran stagger back and drop to his knees. He bowed his head forward, hands on his thighs. Had he been wounded at the end? Had she missed it?

Nedwin hurried forward and helped Galloran to his feet.

"I'm not as young as I once was," Galloran muttered, wiping a sleeve against his glossy forehead. "I am thankful that the fiend grew impatient and tried that kick."

"That was unbelievable," Ferrin mumbled humbly to no one in particular. "I've never ... if I hadn't seen ..."

"I've lived a long time," Jasher told him. "Nobody handles a sword like Galloran."

"You mean to defy me," Torvic said flatly, the comment unsolicited. The words did not belong to Torvic. Everyone looked his way. The displacer sat with his legs crossed, staring blandly.

Galloran faced Torvic, still panting. He was uninjured, but clearly exhausted. "You offered the eyes long ago. I finally came to claim them. I pledged no fealty."

"After all the futile suffering, after all the fruitless effort, after the countless disgraced followers, you persist in returning to your folly. I can see through those eyes, Galloran. You are mine. I will watch your every move."

"Then you will watch me dismantle your empire piece by piece," Galloran said. "When you see anything, it will be the cowardly criminals you employ perishing by my blade. Come for me if you can. I will be waiting."

And with that he replaced the blindfold.

# THE ORACLE

As a furry snake, longer than a shower rod, rippled across his path, Jason decided that he liked the jungle even less than the Sunken Lands. The tropical chaos of ferns, fronds, vines, and towering trees was much hotter than the swamp and just as poisonous, and the journey was taking much longer.

They followed the remnants of an ancient stone road that survived mostly as a jumbled mess overgrown with shrubs and creeping plants. For much of the way, the broken paving stones seemed more likely to turn an ankle than to provide solid footing. But the vanishing roadway still provided access through dense portions of steaming jungle that appeared otherwise impenetrable. And according to Galloran, the archaic thoroughfare led directly to the Temple of Mianamon.

Galloran had not removed his blindfold since the battle at the Last Inn. He shuffled forward with one hand on Corinne's shoulder, the other using a walking stick to tap the ground ahead. Drake had tried to convince him to abandon the blindfold during the journey, stressing that Maldor must have already assumed where they were headed, and that views of the surrounding vegetation would reveal little if anything. But Galloran had maintained that he wanted his enemies to see as little as possible, whether or not the view was considered consequential.

Nedwin led the way, using a bright torivorian sword as a machete to hack through the worst of the verdure. He had commented several times about how the edge never seemed to dull no matter how many obstacles he slashed. Galloran had lent the other captured sword to Jasher.

Jason had spent time in conversation with Jasher as they walked the jungle road. Jasher had been reborn in time to witness Lodan's First Death, and then had tracked Galloran and the diplomats from the Seven Vales to Felrook. The Amar Kabal had reached a peaceful settlement with the emperor, and Galloran had claimed the eyes that Maldor had offered years before. Following the grafting, the emperor had let him depart with no argument.

Once Galloran and Dorsio left Felrook, Jasher had joined them and traveled southeast until meeting Nedwin in the wilderness near the Last Inn. Apparently, Nedwin had heard a disturbance in the hall and slipped out the window with his bedding an instant before the soldiers had entered his room. He had stealthily made his way across the rooftops in order to sneak away and go for help.

Jasher looked younger, but his mannerisms were the same as ever. Jason felt grateful to be back in the company of the first seedman he had met in Lyrian, but he could tell he was not nearly as grateful as Farfalee.

Murky clouds had threatened overhead all morning. From off to one side of the road came the familiar patter of raindrops on leaves. A moment later, rain came bucketing down, soaking Jason's hair in seconds.

Downpours tended to come and go quickly in the jungle, but the wetness inevitably lingered. The air was too humid for clothes to really dry, so Jason generally ranged between drenched and damp. He felt certain they would all end up reeking of mold before the tropical trek was complete.

He saw a parrot with feathers like flower petals roosting on a nearby limb, head tucked to hide from the deluge. Thanks to his interest in animals, the staggering variety of wildlife in the jungle had been one of Jason's compensations for the heat and the danger. Bright frogs, exotic birds, vivid lizards, vibrant insects, and numberless serpents contributed to the local fauna. Nedwin had pointed out a constrictor longer than a school bus, slithering among high limbs in a sinuous series of loops and curves.

Jason's favorites were the monkeys. The diversity seemed limitless—short black hair; long golden hair; striped hair; tiny round ears; huge pointed ears; two arms; four arms; slender tails; bushy tails; stubby tails; colorful ridges; spurs on the ankles or wrists to aid in climbing—all ranging from the size of squirrels to the size of toddlers.

The plants exhibited comparable variety. Broad fanlike leaves; limp streamers; ferny fronds; corkscrewing tendrils; slim, pointed greenery; clusters of minute leaflets; and seemingly every other conceivable manner of foliage decorated the shrubs and trees. Jason had never pictured flowers of such striking hues—metallic, fluorescent, iridescent. Nor had he imagined such an assortment of carnivorous flora—grasping vines, clutching leaves, sucking tubes, stalks affixed to mouthlike pods, stinging bowls of sweet nectar, and sticky mats that folded around unsuspecting prey.

The pelting rain persisted until puddles had formed at frequent intervals along the ancient road. By the time the rain relented, the delegation had been thoroughly soaked. Even with all the wetness, Jason didn't feel chilled. Nor did he feel refreshed. The air was too hot and sticky to feel much besides uncomfortable.

Galloran slipped and splashed to his knees in a brown puddle. He did not arise any wetter, but he was certainly muddier. His face remained composed, but Jason noticed one hand clenched into a fist, veins standing out on the back.

"You could take off the blindfold, Father," Corinne said.

"It is better this way," Galloran replied in his raspy voice. "My borrowed sight comes at a price. I must never rely too much on these eyes. They are a last resort."

Jason felt a sting on his neck, like the bite of an insect. The tropical bugs had not bothered them so far, thanks to a lotion Nedwin had devised. Slapping the sting, Jason found a small dart, little more than a feathered needle.

Soft hisses came from the surrounding foliage. "Blowguns!" Nedwin called. "We're under attack."

Galloran tore the blindfold from his eyes and drew his sword. The others sprang into action as well. Nedwin and Ferrin raced to one side of the path, pushing through tall stalks of reddish wood similar to bamboo. Drake, Jasher, Tark, and Aram ran the other way, slashing foliage when necessary. Farfalee set an arrow to the string of her bow, as did Nollin. Io, Nia, Corinne, Rachel, and Jason all drew weapons, positioned near Galloran on the road.

As part of the group plunged into the jungle and the others scanned high and low, there came no more whispers of blowguns. Nor was there any sight or sound of enemies fleeing. After passing out of view for a few minutes, all of the delegation besides Nedwin returned to the road.

"They moved like ghosts," Ferrin said. "Nedwin kept after them."

The group remained alert as more time passed. No further attacks came, and eventually Nedwin returned. "I glimpsed green figures, apparently clad in ivy. They were too swift. Few can outmaneuver me across difficult terrain, but these folk were my superiors. They fled through the trees like monkeys and across the ground like wildcats. I was fortunate to catch sight of them from a distance. I had no hope of reaching them. I was hit by three darts but can perceive no effects."

"A dart pricked me on the hand," Galloran said.

Jason, Corinne, Tark, Io, and Drake had all been hit on their skin. Several of the others had little darts sticking to their clothes. Nobody was feeling adverse reactions.

“What were the darts for?” Jason asked.

Galloran inspected the tiny pinprick on his hand, sniffing it and tapping it. “When last I visited Mianamon, I heard tales of treefolk who dwelled deep in the jungle. I never saw them, nor heard of any this far north. But times change.”

“One of the races of Certius?” Ferrin asked.

“Most likely,” Galloran agreed.

“Would they have used a slow-acting venom?” Ferrin asked.

“I sense no irritation,” Galloran said, perplexed, flexing his hand. “None at all. Why risk drawing near and firing darts? We’ll have to watch these injuries.”

Two days later, the first short tufts of moss appeared around the spots where the darts had pierced skin. The dense green growth looked as though it could be carelessly plucked away, but was actually anchored deeper in the flesh than a first glance could discern. A sharp knife could scrape away some of the moss, but it became apparent that a deep incision would be required to root it out. Of all who had been hit, only Io remained unaffected.

Showing no indication of pain, Nedwin rooted out the tiny patch of moss just above his wrist. By the next day, it had not only grown back, but the greenery had spread. Moss that had been trimmed the day before had also returned and multiplied. The untouched patches had spread as well.

The moss inflicted no pain. When Jason stroked the fuzzy circle on his neck, the moss seemed to belong there as much as the surrounding hairs. But who knew what would happen as it continued to spread? At best, he would become a mossy freak. At worst, the moss would overwhelm his body, causing harm or death.

A couple of days later, Jason watched Nia munching on a large, glossy leaf as she walked. Scarcely a few weeks had passed since meeting her, but as promised, she already looked older. When they had met she had looked thirteen or fourteen. Now she looked sixteen or seventeen. She was a few inches taller, having surpassed both Rachel and Tark.

For the past week, the delegation had mostly eaten unusual fruit and vegetables foraged by Nedwin. But Io and Nia claimed food whenever they wanted it. “This jungle must look like one big salad to you,” Jason said.

“I’m a growing girl,” she replied, taking another bite. “Think I’ll pass you up?”

“I doubt it, since your dad was shorter than me.” He unconsciously rubbed his hand against the lush moss now covering most of the side and back of his neck. It had become a habit.

“How much does the moss bother you?” she asked.

“I kind of like the texture,” he admitted, realizing that he had been stroking it again. “But it’s gross how it keeps spreading. It’s really weird to think of it covering my face.”

“There must be a way to stop it,” Nia said.

Jason shrugged. “Nedwin knows more about these jungles than just about anyone. He has no idea what this moss is or what might cure it. I just hope it doesn’t start controlling us, like the goma worms.”

“What would moss want you to do?” Nia giggled. “Go sit on a rock by a stream?”

“What if I turn into a plant?” Jason asked, trying to keep his voice casual, although he was voicing a deep concern.

“I’ll make sure you get sunlight and water,” Nia said.

Jason tried to smile at the joke.

“It only seems to coat the surface,” Nia pointed out, her tone more consoling.

“After it covers everything, the moss might grow inward.”

“Hopefully, we can get help at the temple,” Drake said from behind. A dart had hit the side of his jaw, and the resultant greenery had spread into half a mossy beard. “The oracle and her people have dwelled in the jungle for a long time.”

They continued in silence for some time.

“Too bad Io couldn’t grow any moss,” Nia said. “He’d have a portable snack.”

Jason forced a chuckle. She was trying to lighten the mood. The effort made him think of her adaptability. She no longer had an accent, and had picked up on the nuances of how he and Rachel spoke and kidded. Under other circumstances, her comments would have amused him more. But the worry of parasitic moss slowly claiming his body was hard to shake. Still, she was trying, so he might as well meet her halfway. “He can always have some of my surplus.”

Nia scrunched her nose. “This jungle gets hot. What if your moss inherits your body odor?”

“You guys eat dead rats,” Jason said.

“We have to draw the line somewhere.”

At the front of the group, Nedwin raised a hand. “Hear that?” he asked.

“What?” Galloran replied.



“A high whine,” Nedwin described. “Perhaps a whistle. Faint. At the edge of hearing.”

Jason heard nothing. But he noticed the vines at his feet had begun to writhe. The entire forest floor came to life at once, inert vines suddenly thrashing like bullwhips. With alarming speed and accuracy, the vines began to curl around legs, arms, and torsos. A strange smell suffused the air, and the ground suddenly seemed to tilt and undulate.

Jason tried to draw his sword, but was too late. He was already on the ground, arms pinioned to his sides. From his position on the ground, Jason watched Galloran, blindfold discarded, slicing vines with his torivorian blade. The vines lashed at him from all directions, but he pivoted and slashed with flawless skill and timing, slowly carving a path away from the road.

Jason felt like the ground was rocking and spinning. Galloran began to stagger drunkenly, not from the onslaught of vines, but apparently in reaction to whatever odor had made Jason unsteady. Finally the tendrils caught hold of Galloran and dragged him down.

Jason struggled against the vines. They tightened painfully as he resisted, then slackened a degree when he relaxed.

“Rachel?” Farfalee asked.

“I can’t,” she replied. “I tried. Edomic won’t work. The commands won’t stick.”

Jason closed his eyes. He had never felt this dizzy. It was like the ground was whirling on multiple axes, not just spinning but flipping and rocking in every possible combination. Eyes open or closed made no difference. The sensation made him nauseated, but before he could throw up, Jason lost consciousness.

Jason awoke, dangling from a horizontal pole by his arms and legs. The pole was in motion, probably being carried between two people. He was bound in place at his wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles. The position was neither comfortable nor intolerable. His eyes were blindfolded.

“Hello?” Jason called.

A blunt object, probably a stick, thumped painfully against his side. Apparently he wasn’t supposed to speak.

“We’re here,” answered Drake. Jason heard a few meaty thumps, presumably the punishment for the reply.

Jason dangled in silence for some time. At least he wasn’t dizzy, and at least he wasn’t dead. They had been captured, probably by the same guys who had

shot them with darts. Jason supposed it was better than being strangled and devoured by vines.

How long had he been out? It was impossible to tell. He could feel the sun shining. It could be the same day or a different day. The air felt hot and humid as usual. Whoever carried them moved silently and smoothly.

Where could they be going? Jungles and blowguns made his mind wander to cannibalism and shrunken heads. Would he and his friends become the ingredients to a tribal soup?

Surely Ferrin could escape these bonds. Detach arms and legs, reattach, and he would be free. The poles were not living wood, so Rachel should be able to split them. Perhaps they were waiting for the right moment. Telepathy would be useful right now. He supposed Galloran, Corinne, and Rachel were all engaged in mental conversation. Assuming they had survived the vines.

After a long time, Jason was set down. He could feel plants and roots beneath his body. Fingers crammed paste into his mouth. It didn't taste too bad, vaguely fruity. He drank from a wooden cup pressed to his lips. After a few minutes, the pole rose into the air, and he moved onward.

After another break, Jason began to sense the light of day fading. What would happen at sunset, when Aram grew?

Jason never got to find out. His pole tilted to a steep angle, as if his bearers were climbing a steep hill. The pole leveled for a short while. Then he was set on a floor of smooth stone tiles.

"Release them," said a female voice with a casual air of command. "These are the wayfarers we have expected. Please forgive the impolite reception, good travelers. There are many from outside the boundaries of the jungle who mean us harm."

Nimble fingers unbound Jason's wrists and feet. He rose to his knees and pulled off his blindfold, finding himself surrounded by his friends at the center of a strange assemblage.

Some of the hundreds of beings around them looked like regular humans clad in fine robes, hoods cast back to reveal curious faces. Most of the figures were humanoids enshrouded by vegetation. Shaggy moss covered the majority, but ivy coated a great number as well. A few were draped so heavily in dark vines that they lost most of their shape and looked more like tall heaps of seaweed than living beings. Another minority were encased by twisted black wood bristling with huge thorns. None of the vegetated people wore clothes, but the plants kept them perfectly modest.

Among the crowd stood tall, white apes with fur-fringed faces and round eyes. With their slender bodies and long limbs, Jason thought they looked like gibbons, although they were much too large. The snowy primates watched the proceedings sedately, a few clutching slim rods.

They were all gathered within an immense room composed of dark gray stone. The walls slanted together at odd angles overhead, forming the inside of an irregular pyramid. The room had several openings. Through one Jason could see the sun poised to set, red rays caressing miles of exotic treetops.

"I should not remove my blindfold," Galloran said, pushing away the hands of a robed figure who had been trying to unbind his eyes. "I am Galloran, son of Dromidus. My eyes belong to our common enemy. Have we reached Mianamon?"

"You have," replied the woman who had ordered their release. Short and slight, the speaker wore a silky robe the color of storm clouds. A circlet of purple blossoms adorned her brow. "I am Ulani, daughter of Hispa."

"Does the prophetess still abide here?" Galloran asked.

"She does," Ulani answered. "Her Eminence told us weeks ago to expect you, otherwise you would have been slain long before now. Of late we seldom offer hospitality to outlanders."

"Several of us have been infected by peculiar vegetation," Galloran said.

"We can reverse the process," Ulani assured him. "Attar of regent orchids will expel the invasive moss. Please forgive the inconvenience. Such measures are meant to warn and dissuade imprudent pilgrims."

"I have been here before," Galloran said. "When I came here last, I beheld no treefolk among you."

"You behold them now?" Ulani asked, amused.

Galloran touched his blindfold. "I saw them coming for us when we were held fast by vines. They carried us here."

"The people of the jungle have united against the threat of Maldor," Ulani said. "The oracle administers to them and offers our services. In return we enjoy their cooperation and protection. Old wounds strain relations between the various tribes of treefolk, but they have agreed to consider the temple neutral ground and to stand together against the pupil of their ancient enemy from the north."

"This is bracing news," Galloran said. "We have traveled far at great cost in search of guidance regarding how to resist the enemy you have named."

Ulani inclined her head slightly. "The oracle is aware of your intent. She has spent weeks preparing for her greatest prophecy. Tomorrow you will have your answer. Today she wishes to meet with you, one by one. Follow me."

The conversation had afforded Jason some time to massage feeling back into his tingling hands. He walked with the others up some broad steps, and then into a corridor. They arrived in a trapezoidal room where tilted walls rose to a flat ceiling. Abundant furniture upholstered with the pelts of jungle cats awaited in clusters across the wide floor.

Ulani passed through a door set back in an alcove. She returned accompanied by an elderly woman. The woman wore a white robe with gold trim. Wrinkles lined her angular features. The visible tendons and bones on the back of her spotted hands made them appear fragile. Golden charms hung from sagging earlobes.

Despite her age, the woman held herself erect and walked with no difficulty. She came and stood before Jason. "I would converse with you first."

"Me?" Jason asked.

The woman gave no reply. She pointed to Ferrin next, then Tark, Nedwin, Drake, Aram, Jasher, Nia, Farfalee, Io, Nollin, and then Corinne. She indicated Rachel second to last, and finally Galloran.

Without another word, the aged woman withdrew from the chamber through the same portal she had entered.

"Go," Ulani told Jason, gesturing toward the recessed door.

"Okay," Jason said. He went to the portal and found the door ajar. He opened it further, stepped inside, and shut it behind him. Incense burned in sculpted vessels around the room.

The elderly woman sat on a cushioned chair that looked like a curving length of ribbon. She gazed at Jason with fathomless eyes, her expression neither kind nor hostile. "Come take my hand," she invited.

"Are you the oracle?" Jason asked.

"I am. Give me your hand and relax your mind."

Jason crossed to her and gently grasped her bony hand. She clasped his hand in both of hers and closed her eyes. Jason sensed no otherworldly powers at play. If anything, he felt a little awkward.

She released his hand and looked up at him. "Sit down."

He sat on a low, round, cushioned stool. It might have been an ottoman.

"What do you wish to ask me?" she invited.

"You can see the future?"

“At my best.”

“How?”

She smiled. “You wish to understand. Do you think of time as sequential?”

“One thing happening after another? I guess so.”

“Do you consider space that way?”

“Space? As sequential? Not really.”

“Yet when you gaze upon the stars, you see them as they were, not as they are.”

“Okay,” Jason said, trying to make sense of the statement using some of what he knew about astronomy. “The light travels through space. The farther the light has come, the older it is. Some of the light we see tonight could be from stars that have died long ago. It just took the light a long time to get here. So we’re seeing back in time.”

She smacked her lips. “In the Beyond, you have those who gaze deep into space through lenses, who gather light and sound and particles as they seek to understand their place in the universe.”

“We have astronomers.”

“I am like an astronomer.” She said it as if she had fully explained herself.

“You have a telescope that sees through time?”

“In a sense. Time is more like space than you appreciate. You recognize time as sequence only. Beginning and end. Before and after. We dwell in a temporary state, and so this is natural. Your current state began. Your current state will end. But that which is eternal views time differently.”

This wasn’t making sense. “You’re eternal?”

“I try to touch the eternal. You and I move through time like a flame on a string. The ashes behind are the past, consumed, unreachable. The string ahead is the future. But the only moment we inhabit, the only moment where we can act, is the present, the point where the flame burns, the point where time touches eternity.”

Jason nodded. “All right.”

“To the eternal mind, the entire string is ever present, ever burning. No point is out of reach.”

“Are you trying to break my brain?”

She grinned. “Try simpler terms. Before making a particular choice, have you ever endeavored to anticipate the consequences?”

Jason thought about the dungeon at Felrook. Maldor had offered to free him in return for servitude. Jason had known that to deny him would mean long days

and weeks and months of torture. He had glimpsed his future. He had also guessed what serving Maldor would mean and how it might change him.

Jason had experienced this same kind of foresight for simpler choices throughout his life. He knew generally what a bike ride with Matt would bring versus a day volunteering at the zoo. “Yes. Is that what you do? Guess at the consequences of decisions? Try to visualize them?”

“It is similar to what I do,” the oracle explained. “Like you, I am a temporal being. I was born. I will die. I am caught up in what feels like the stream of time, my body gradually aging, the seasons changing, each breath keeping me alive. But I am trying to see beyond the present, into the future and the past. I am trying to see beyond the point I currently inhabit in space and time to the infinite points I do not inhabit.”

“How?”

“By tapping into senses beyond the five most obvious,” she replied. “By striving to access the eternal mind. Viewing the future is more difficult than seeing the past. The past is singular, definite. The future is also singular. Something definite will happen. But since what will happen shifts with every choice made, there are kaleidoscopic possibilities when the future is viewed from the present. Instead of looking for truth through a telescope, try a kaleidoscope. It is a challenge. The farther you dare to look, the more destinies involved, the more difficult it becomes.”

“So you make educated guesses,” Jason said.

She shrugged. “Some forecasts are more certain than others. Maldor’s rise has eclipsed most possible futures. Sometimes we oracles try to see the future in order to influence it. We do our best to nudge the coming years toward prosperity and away from disaster. I searched for many years to find some way to avoid Maldor’s dominion. In all those years, scouring every reality open to my awareness, I only glimpsed a single path that might lead to his premature downfall.”

Jason felt chills. “That’s why I’m here.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

He swallowed dryly. “Have I already played my part?”

“I believe we are on the proper path. I knew that you, Rachel, and Galloran would need to come here for success to be possible. I will be sure tomorrow.”

“Why me?” Jason asked.

“Imagine standing on a mountaintop. Imagine stones scattered at your feet. Imagine you have been tasked with selecting a stone or two and then throwing

them for the purpose of causing an avalanche that will devastate the surrounding wilderness.

“Simeon of the Giddy Nine came to me. I considered all of the possible stones. I elected to throw him at you and Rachel. You both impacted Galloran. I hoped that you three would in turn collide with other key targets in precisely the right way. I believe that your arrival here means I selected good stones and estimated correct trajectories. But the avalanche is just beginning. Tomorrow I will know more about the possibilities.”

“How did you find us?” Jason wondered.

“I’m aware of the Beyond,” she said. “Yours is not the only other reality besides this one. Of everywhere I looked, only bringing you and Rachel here allowed me to glimpse success. Not probable success. But possible.”

“So now I wait until tomorrow?”

“I will meet the others. Then I will entomb myself in clay. To prophesy I must consume substances harmful to my health. This time I will heavily poison myself with fumes and liquids and minerals, and exert myself to touch the eternal as never before. I will search for the path to depose Maldor and share all the insight I can acquire.”

“Poison yourself? Will this kill you?”

“Not until after I deliver the prophecy.”

Rachel sat beside Galloran, lost in thought. After the others had communed with the oracle, they were escorted elsewhere. Some had remained with her for a long time. Rachel assumed the oracle was reading their futures. Should she ask to know her future? Should she ask whether she would ever return home?

Corinne had been with the oracle for some time. Rachel had considered asking her a telepathic question, but had worried that it might cause some sort of psychic interference.

She glanced at Galloran, blindfold over his eyes, arms folded, head bowed, mouth frowning. Could he be asleep?

*I am awake, he conveyed. You would not be able to communicate with Corinne from here. That room is shielded from prying minds.*

*You’ve talked to the oracle before. Should I be nervous?*

*Do not be afraid of her. She means to help. If you are nervous regarding what future she will see, you are not alone.*

Rachel laughed softly. *I can’t picture you nervous.*

*Good.*

Rachel laughed again. *I've wanted to ask you something.*

*Go ahead.*

Rachel hesitated. *How did you defeat that torivor? I mean, I know you're a great swordsman, but that seemed impossible.*

His lips bent into a smile. *Can you keep a secret?*

*Sure.*

*I'm not sure that the secret must be kept. But I want it kept just in case.*

*I'll never tell anyone. I swear.*

Galloran shifted in his seat. *I wouldn't tell you, unless I thought the information could become relevant for you someday.*

*Okay.*

*You know that I can hear your mind, even thoughts you do not intentionally send.*

*Yes. You did it a moment ago.*

*To an extent, I can do that with torivors.*

She thought about the implications. The realization hit her hard. *You know what they're going to do before they do it!*

He nodded. *When we fight, I watch what they are about to do. I'm moving to counter them before they are moving to strike. I watch how they adjust, and I adjust accordingly. It requires focus and expertise with a sword. Even knowing each movement in advance, one small miscalculation would destroy me. I have always been a student of the sword, but fighting my first lurker was how I learned to fight as I do. I saw the duel as the lurker saw the duel, and learned to fight as it fought.*

Rachel stared at the faint scars on his strong hands. *I noticed that you seemed to know shortcuts or something. You defeat people so easily.*

*I have now bested three lurkers. Each battle has been easier than the one before. That is not to say that the fourth won't kill me. But I have learned much. I learned during this fight that I can engage a lurker more effectively with a single sword than with a pair.*

*You can't read just any mind, Rachel sent.*

*I can't read most minds. Sometimes I'll catch unpredictable glimpses of what an opponent means to do. But if I couldn't reliably spy on the minds of lurkers, the first one who came for me years ago would have slain me in an instant.*

Corinne emerged from the portal that led to the oracle. Ulani gestured to a servant, who led Corinne away. "Come," Ulani told Rachel, motioning toward the door.

*See you later, Rachel conveyed. I'll keep your secret.*

*You're the first to know it, Galloran replied.*



Rachel entered the room, and the oracle asked her to sit. The woman stared at her in silence for an uncomfortable length of time. Rachel wondered if the oracle was looking into her future.

*Are we going to talk?* Rachel conveyed.

“Not that way, child. I must conserve all of my strength. Let me have your hand.”

“Are you going to read my future?”

“I just need to get a clearer sense of you. Information to use when I do try to penetrate the future.”

The oracle took one hand in both of hers. She closed her eyes, nodding faintly, her whole body rocking slightly, then let the hand fall. The oracle kept her eyes closed. Her upper lip quivered.

“I’ve waited my whole life for one who could replace me,” the oracle said.

“What do you mean?” Rachel asked.

“None of my acolytes have sufficient talent. Ulani is the closest, but she will never be more than a shadow of me, as I am but a shadow of the greatest seers. You, however, could surpass me.”

“You know I’ve been practicing Edomic?”

“Even when you were far away, in the Beyond, I could sense potential in you. I gave Erinda the task of drawing you here for that reason. Potential is not always realized, but, Rachel, you are more than I expected. I can feel the power in you. You have come a long way very quickly. Many options will be open to you.”

Rachel braced herself. She didn’t want to ask the question. The words escaped as a whisper. “Will I ever get home?”

“Do you still wish to go home, child? Consider all you could do here. All you could be.”

“I want to help Galloran. I want to stop Maldor. But if we succeed, I want to go home.”

The oracle considered her. “Part of me wishes to keep you here, whether you choose it or not. I don’t mean here in Lyrian. I mean here in this temple. Under my guidance, your skills would grow. You would learn how to gain the knowledge needed to guide this world.”

“But you won’t keep me here?”

“Galloran needs you. And I need Galloran. Should he fail, Lyrian will fall. Despite the best efforts of the children of Certius, this temple will be overrun. Darkness will reign from the northernmost tundra to the southernmost jungle.”

“The treefolk were made by Certius, right?”

“As was this temple,” the oracle said. “Certius built two strongholds in the jungle: Mianamon in the north, and Paggatar to the southwest, in the heart. He shaped these walls with his words, raised them with his will. At Mianamon he established my order and taught us how to enhance our sight. He lived and worked at Paggatar. But Zokar came and destroyed him, much as Maldor seeks to come here and destroy us, the descendants of those who escaped the prior invasion.”

“Can we stop him?”

“I will know more tomorrow. You must continue to increase your abilities. Some here can assist you. Learn all you can while you remain with us.”

“Okay,” Rachel said.

“You want to know if you will go home. I have spent considerable time studying our respective realities. Five years and nine weeks from tomorrow our realities will be properly synchronized. I cannot speak for any other time. If you survive, and if you so choose, that would be the day I recommend for your return.”

Rachel felt a violent surge of relief. Five years might be a long time to wait, but it was much preferable to uncertainty and despair. Tears sprung to her eyes. She had not expected this particular hope to resurface. “If I go home on that day, I should be able to find my parents?”

“It should get you close to your proper time. Now leave me. I must speak with Galloran.”

“Thank you so much.”

The oracle gave her a sad smile. “My dear girl, please do not thank me yet.”

# THE PROPHECY

The next morning, Jason and Rachel walked down a long stairway deep below the temple. Ulani led the way, flanked by a pair of hooded acolytes bearing torches. The entire delegation followed. Nobody spoke.

At the bottom of the stairs, cowed figures hauled open a pair of ornate doors, granting access to a shadowy chamber. Melting candles partially illuminated a variety of ancient carvings. A disgustingly sweet smell saturated the air.

The delegation walked toward the circular pool on the far side of the room. A scaffold over the pool allowed a group of hooded figures to raise a slick gray slab from the fragrant fluid. When the upright slab hung suspended, the acolytes departed.

The face of the oracle was visible in the center of the upper half of the slab. Her eyes were closed, her wrinkled face composed.

The ornate doors closed. The slab dripped. Fumes rose from the aromatic pool.

The eyes of the oracle opened, made iridescent by a creamy film. Those eyes did not make contact with anyone present. They seemed to stare inward or, perhaps, far beyond the confines of the room.

“All paths but one lead to Maldor’s dominion,” the oracle intoned. Her voice did not sound much like it had the day before. She spoke with a remote certainty. “A single precarious lane leads to his premature demise, encompassed by failure, littered with corpses.”

“What should we do?” Galloran asked.

The eyes showed no flicker of recognition. “Two quests. Galloran must rouse Trensicourt. The Amar Kabal must join him, as must the drinlings. Together the free people of Lyrian must march on Felrook in the coming spring. The host will be insufficient, yet Felrook must fall.”

“By spring?” Nollin murmured. “Summer is already spent.”

“Rachel, Io, Ferrin, Nedwin, Nollin, and Tark must join Galloran.”

“Attack Felrook,” Ferrin chuckled darkly, shaking his head.

“Jason Walker must find the abode of Darian the Pyromancer. My sight cannot find his dwelling. I do not know what will be learned. The last abode of Darian the Seer can be learned at the Celestine Library within the Inland Sea. This greatest of seers has vital knowledge. Make sure the secret can be shared.”

“The Celestine Library is guarded,” Ferrin said. “Inaccessible.”

“Darian should have perished ages ago,” Farfalee added softly.

The oracle blinked, her cheeks twitching. “Jasher, Farfalee, Drake, Aram, Corinne, and Nia must join Jason. The parallel quests must succeed. Many present will perish. You must stand united. Otherwise the children of Eldrin will be vanquished, as will the children of Certius, and an age of immeasurable darkness will choke the world. Spend the fall and winter here. Depart as winter wanes. Send a few ahead to prepare the way. The timing is crucial. I have seen and I have spoken.”

“Felrook cannot be taken,” Nollin scoffed mildly. “Not by ten times the number we could muster.”

“I’m not leaving Jason,” Tark griped. “Look again.”

The oracle gasped, cheeks quivering. For a moment, her eyes were not hazy, and she peered desperately at Galloran. “I searched, but could not view the end. Nothing seen, everything glimpsed. You need one with a truer eye and a farther gaze.” Her eyes rolled back, her face slackening. “A secret from the past can ransom the future. The servant will betray the master. The pleasant paths have crumbled. Lyrian must be purchased with sacrifice. Our hope is red, like the blood of heroes; black as the bowels of the earth; and white, like a flash of orantium.”

Her eyelids fluttered rapidly. Drool leaked from the corners of her mouth. Hooded acolytes stormed into the room, armed with tools to cut the oracle from the clay. She died long before they succeeded.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Two down, one to go. Many people have helped the *Beyonders* series to continue. My editor, Liesa Abrams, did much to improve the story. My agent, Simon Lipskar, arranged the practical side and offered editorial guidance.

The entire team at Simon & Schuster did a great job spreading the word about *A World Without Heroes* so that the series could find readers. I feel proud to be associated with them. Thanks go to Mara Anastas, Carolyn Swerdloff, Anna McKean, Paul Crichton, Bethany Buck, Matt Pantoliano, Fiona Simpson, and the rest of the team. These are not just people who do their jobs well—they are people I enjoy spending time with! The folks at Shadow Mountain have also been very supportive of this new series.

Early readers for this volume included some friends and family, namely Mary Mull, Cherie and Bryson Mull, Tiffany Mull, Pam Mull, Chris Schoebinger, Liz Saban, Jason and Natalie Conforto, and the ever vigilant eye of J. Tucker Davis Esq., M.D., J.D. Their tips, catches, and feedback were very beneficial. My talented cousin Mike Walton drew the map and some cool pictures for the website. Once again the design team produced a terrific cover—special thanks to Lisa Vega. And thanks to Jeannie Ng for lending her close eye for consistency to the manuscript.

My family and friends are my secret weapon. My wife, Mary, is my first editor, and her insight and support have been a key ingredient to my success on every book, this one included. My kids bring a highly motivating joy into my life. And my siblings, parents, and friends help me put on my Salt Lake City launch parties and contribute in numerous other ways. My dad, Gary, has helped sell T-shirts; my mom, Pam, dresses up as Muriel the witch; my aunt Kim and sister Tiffany pose as fairies or Ephira; and my brother Ty drags his friends out to help with the event. My comedy friends from years past help make my launch parties cool and funny, including Summer Mull, Bryson Mull, Robert Marsh, Chad and Shelly Morris, Gavin and Maren McCaleb, and Joel Hilton, who does a killer Jack Sparrow impersonation.

Some people from the early days must also be shown gratitude. The Allen family, including Aaron, Robert, and Daryl, were very supportive of this concept back before I had ever published anything. Kjirstin Youngberg and Dean Hale also offered some advice in the past. And my brother-in-law Sean Fleming helped me overcome some doubts I had regarding the ending of book one. His support helped me resist taking the story in a safer, more predictable direction. With the benefit of hindsight, I feel that choice made the series cooler.

Among the others I thank, I must never forget you, the reader. Without you my books would serve no purpose. The story does not happen on the page. It happens in your mind. Thanks for bringing *Beyonders* to life by participating in the story with me. Thanks for telling others about the story. Most people find books through word of mouth. If you're enjoying *Beyonders* so far, I expect that you'll love the last volume, *Chasing the Prophecy*. I sure hope I'm right!

Dear Readers,

As I thought about bonus content to include in the first-edition hardcover of *Seeds of Rebellion*, my mind turned immediately to the interviews with the oracle. The most important characters in this series had a chance to converse with her in private, and I thought it might be interesting to witness more of those exchanges. I selected three characters to follow.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Also by Brandon Mull**

**Beyonders**

*A World Without Heroes*

**Fablehaven**

*Fablehaven*

*Rise of the Evening Star*

*Grip of the Shadow Plague*

*Secrets of the Dragon Sanctuary*

*Keys to the Demon Prison*



THRILLING CONCLUSION TO THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

# BEYONDERS

CHASING THE PROPHECY



“AN IRRESISTIBLE MIX OF ADVENTURE, HUMOR, AND MAGIC.”

—**RICK RIORDAN**, author of the *Percy Jackson* series, on  
*A World Without Heroes*

# BRANDON MULL

AUTHOR OF THE FABLEHAVEN SERIES

# BEYONDERS

## CHASING THE PROPHECY

◆ BOOK THREE ◆

### BRANDON MULL

Aladdin

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

# CONTENTS

Prologue: A Hero Falls

Chapter 1: Acolyte

Chapter 2: Mianamon

Chapter 3: Departure

Chapter 4: The Journey North

Chapter 5: A Private Meeting

Chapter 6: Durna

Chapter 7: Coronation

Chapter 8: Hijackers

Chapter 9: A Proposal

Chapter 10: Avenger

Chapter 11: Advice

Chapter 12: Windbreak Island

Chapter 13: Final Preparations

Chapter 14: The Maumet

Chapter 15: Library

Chapter 16: The Petruscan Scroll

Chapter 17: Marching

Chapter 18: Swords in the Night

Chapter 19: The Western Pass

Chapter 20: Landfall

Chapter 21: Treachery

Chapter 22: Four Keeps

Chapter 23: The Fuming Waste

Chapter 24: Ambush

Chapter 25: Decision

Chapter 26: The Narrow Way

Chapter 27: Secrets From The Past

Chapter 28: The Last Wizard

Chapter 29: Destiny

Chapter 30: Justice  
Chapter 31: A Prudent Precaution  
Chapter 32: Telepathy  
Chapter 33: An Interrupted Feast  
Chapter 34: Beyonders  
Chapter 35: Sacrifice  
Chapter 36: The Flash  
Epilogue: Homeward Bound

Acknowledgments  
About Brandon Mull

*This book is dedicated to you, my reader. I hope you find it rewarding!*

PROLOGUE

# A HERO FALLS

Nearly Twenty Years Ago . . .

An arrow hissed out of the night and thudded near the embers of the shielded campfire. Always a light sleeper, the young squire jerked awake. This close to Felrook it was a wonder he had dozed at all. Nedwin stayed low, holding his breath, and stared out into the darkness, scrutinizing the shadows beyond the shelter of their modest encampment. All was dark and still. Some of the men around him whispered and stirred.

Prince Galloran had posted two sentries up in trees. The angle of the arrow showed that it had come from Malak. Nedwin regretted having glanced directly at the arrow, because the nearby embers from the fire had dulled his night vision. Listening intently to the quietness, he tried to will his eyes to penetrate deeper into the gloom.

Malak would not have launched an arrow into camp unless enemies were almost upon them. Such an arrow was reserved as their most urgent distress signal, and Malak was no jittery novice. Quite the opposite. The twenty men Galloran had handpicked for this final mission were among the most seasoned and intimidating warriors in all of Lyrian. All were veterans of daring campaigns, all had shown an ability to prosper against incredible odds, and all were despised by the emperor.

Nedwin grimly reflected that he was the sole exception. As squire to Galloran, he had been thrilled and honored to learn that he would join this noble company as the only participant who had not yet reached full manhood. He was no great soldier, no master woodsman—his only real specialty was that he knew how to sneak.

Although Nedwin was scarcely thirteen years old, Galloran had already used him as a spy for years. Nedwin possessed a knack for quietly ferreting out information. He understood where to stand in a crowd, how to position himself where a conversation could barely be overheard, how to use his expression and

posture to appear inattentive. He had a sense for when to hide, when to run, and when to appear obliviously engaged in some mundane task. At first Nedwin had brought Galloran unrequested information—suspicious murmurs overheard at court. As Galloran began to recognize his talent, he gave Nedwin secret assignments, and Nedwin had faithfully delivered.

Despite his useful history, Nedwin would not have expected to be included on a campaign like this or to be entrusted with a secret like the one Galloran had privately shared. Faced with the sudden prospect of approaching enemies, Nedwin was relieved to find that he was not particularly afraid for his life. His main worry was disappointing his master.

A strangled cry interrupted the silence. The voice might have been trying to shout “Flee!” or “Fly!” Nedwin listened intently as Malak’s unseen body crashed through branches on the way to the forest floor.

While men around him staggered to their feet, drawing swords and fumbling with bows, Nedwin scurried away from the encampment. He moved using his hands and feet, springing more than crawling. Haste was so crucial that he allowed himself to make a little noise. Finally, he paused behind the trunk of a knobby old tree, wedging himself between a pair of thick, gnarled roots.

The half moon came out from behind a cloud, spreading soft silver radiance over the scene. Before sunset, Galloran had chosen to bed down in the remains of a hall of an ancient warlord. The walls had tumbled down long ago; a few jagged remnants jutted up like haphazard tombstones. Lawson had built the modest fire in the ancient hearth, shielding the flames and trusting the darkness to hide the wispy smoke. Although the timeworn ruins were all but forgotten, and far from a path, they were still something of a landmark. Nedwin would have preferred a more anonymous campsite.

By the ghostly moonlight Nedwin watched a barrage of arrows whisper out of the night, thunking against shields, clanging off armor, and also finding flesh. After three heavy volleys, armored swordsmen rushed into the camp. Galloran’s men raced forward to engage the attackers.

Nedwin gaped at the masterful assault. Clouds had obscured the moon all night. How had their enemies synchronized the attack so perfectly? Darkness had disguised their approach until Malak had issued a late warning. Then the moon had come out just in time to help the enemy archers find targets and to make escape into the murky forest more difficult. Could such impeccable timing be ascribed to luck?

Nedwin noticed a pair of bodyguards ushering Galloran away from the oncoming foes. Galloran appeared to be resisting, and Nedwin had to clap a hand over his mouth to prevent himself from yelling for him to run. If Galloran fell, all would be lost. The other men understood this—all were ready to die for him.

Tursock of Meridon, a bear of a man who wielded a huge war hammer in each hand, charged the onrushing attackers. Lesser fighters would have struggled to employ either of his hammers using both hands, but Tursock's strength was legendary, and he began to send opponents flying, crushing shields, helms, and bones. Other comrades of Galloran followed Tursock into the fray, each a champion capable of singlehandedly turning the tide of a battle. The overmatched attackers quickly succumbed to sword, ax, and spear.

In the brief lull that followed, a fresh volley of arrows hissed from various angles. In a flash Nedwin understood that the foot soldiers had been a sacrificial ploy to draw Galloran's men away from cover! Many of the archers had sighted on Tursock, who staggered and then dropped to his knees, the dark form of his bulky body suddenly imitating a pincushion.

As shields were raised and Galloran's men sought cover, manglers—huge creatures encased in spiky armor and fitted with a deadly variety of whirling blades—appeared out of the darkness. Elite soldiers—conscriptors and displacers—joined them. And arrows continued to fly with fatal accuracy.

Galloran and his bodyguards had retreated into the woods out of view. Nedwin knew how hard it must be for his master to run while others fought to defend him.

Tursock struggled to his feet as the manglers approached. With a tremendous clang he toppled the nearest one, denting its iron shell. A clamor resulted as his hammers battered another, even as a multitude of merciless blades penetrated his furry robes. As the manglers plowed into the other defenders, it became clear that many of the men lacked their full armor. Nedwin's eyes widened in horror as men he had idolized his entire life began to fall.

He tore his gaze from the grisly battle. He had to hide! Galloran had entrusted him with crucial information. His position behind the tree would not suffice. Scanning the vicinity, he spotted a hollow log. He was small enough to squirm inside. But the best hiding places had to be unpredictable. He glanced up. If all else failed, he could climb a tree. He knew how to do so quietly, creeping up to limbs that would seem unreachable to most. No, he wanted something better.



Some distance away Nedwin observed a minor tangle of dead branches on the ground. Perfect. The branches did not appear to offer terrific cover, but if he wormed deep beneath them, took advantage of the shadows, and camouflaged himself using the surrounding foliage, he could become virtually invisible.

Despite the distracting uproar of the battle, Nedwin stayed low and moved silently. There was no way to be sure who else was lurking in the woods. Since he had watched the arrows fly, he did not believe an archer was near his current location, but he had no guarantee.

No armor slowed him. When stealth is your best advantage, armor and cumbersome weaponry become more a hindrance than a protection. He carried only a knife, a small crossbow, and one of the precious explosive spheres that Galloran had entrusted to his care.

Nedwin made it to the deadfall and squirmed underneath, dry twigs crackling despite his best efforts. He brushed leaves and moist dirt over himself, moving efficiently. His position still provided a partial view of the skirmish. Breathing softly, he watched as archers converged on the remaining combatants, bows drawn, led by a very tall conscriptor who held a heavy iron rod.

“Hold!” the tall conscriptor bellowed.

Amazingly, the fighting stopped. Only five of Galloran’s men remained standing, winded and injured. Several manglers had fallen, as had many enemy soldiers. But plenty remained.

“You are surrounded!” the tall conscriptor asserted, leaning on his metal war bar. “This is over! Throw down your arms!”

Nedwin bit his bottom lip. The conscriptor was right. The archers were now near enough that they could easily eliminate the remaining defenders.

“Stand down, lads,” Lawson growled, dropping his short sword.

Nedwin scrunched his brow. Then he realized that taking five live prisoners would cost the attackers more time than five speedy executions. The current priority was to buy Galloran time to escape.

The other defenders surrendered their weapons.

“Where is Galloran?” the tall conscriptor asked, his deep voice carrying.

“You’re misinformed,” Lawson replied. “He was never with us, Groddic. You’ll have to settle for us as your prize.”

Nedwin felt his jaw dangling. The tall conscriptor was Groddic? He was the emperor’s right hand, the commander of the conscriptors. No wonder the attack had been so flawlessly coordinated!

Groddic turned to face the woods, raising his powerful voice. "I am willing to wager that Galloran can still hear me! Furthermore, I expect he will not be content to cower in the woods as I execute his men one by one."

A jolt of panic coursed through Nedwin. Apparently, this conscriptor knew Galloran well. Nedwin wished Jasher were here. He and two other seedmen had gone ahead to scout the rest of their path to Felrook. Jasher might have been able to restrain Galloran or, that failing, might have successfully attacked Groddic himself. Could Groddic know that Jasher was currently absent? He had known when the moon would emerge. . . .

"Surrender yourself, Galloran!" Groddic demanded. "Come forth now, and I swear that your men will survive. Do not force them to pay for your inept leadership!"

Nedwin found a hand straying to the crystal globe Galloran had given him. What if he burst from hiding and threw the sphere at Groddic? No. He could not defeat the remaining foes alone, and if they caught him, they would have even more leverage to lure Galloran out of hiding.

"Don't listen!" Lawson cried. "Honor us by succeeding! We are proud to die for this cause!"

Groddic made a small gesture, and multiple arrows pierced Lawson. The woodsman kept silent as he collapsed.

"As he requested, your companion has died honorably!" Groddic called. "You can still save the other four. Do not hide behind the corpses of your friends! We will track you and find you either way. Torivors are aiding us. No man can escape them."

Groddic waited. His prisoners remained silent. Nedwin hoped his master was hurrying away.

"I am not a patient man!" Groddic bellowed. "Time for another of your comrades to perish."

A blazing white flash suddenly brightened the night, followed by a thunderous boom. Nedwin closed his eyes and listened to the subsequent explosions. Galloran had taken the bait and was hurling explosive spheres at his enemies.

After the explosions ceased, Nedwin opened his eyes, blinking in an attempt to dispel the afterimage of the initial flash. Those explosions must have destroyed several manglers and soldiers and left the survivors temporarily dazzled.

As his vision returned, Nedwin saw his master engaging the enemy. He and his bodyguards would have shielded their eyes as they threw the spheres. They were seeing clearly while the others were half blind.

One of the bodyguards, Alek, had taken up a position atop a heap of worn stones, and he now fired arrow after arrow with lethal accuracy. The other bodyguard used his battle-ax to protect Galloran, who stalked implacably among his enemies, slaying them at will.

Nedwin could not see Groddic. Could the initial explosions have slain him? Could they have been so fortunate?

Galloran's captured men were resisting, but as the enemy soldiers recovered from the initial surprise, the rebellious prisoners began to fall. There were too many enemies! Alek went down, injured by a projectile. Galloran and his remaining bodyguard ended up back-to-back, fighting for their lives.

When his bodyguard fell, Galloran charged forward, whirling and dodging and slashing, somehow carving a path through the crowd of opponents. Nedwin had never seen a man dispatch foes so efficiently. Against all odds, having rescued no men, Galloran might cut his way free. If he could just carve a path to the woods, he could leave behind not more than fifteen disorganized enemies. Galloran raged forward, his matchless sword cleaving helms and shearing through armor. He was going to escape! As had happened so many times before, despite his ill-advised bravado, Galloran would live to fight another day.

"Face me, coward!" a deep voice bellowed. Limping toward Galloran, Groddic shoved his own men aside. He wore no helm, and it was clear that part of his face had been charred.

"No," Nedwin whispered. "Go."

Groddic continued on a course to intercept Galloran. If Galloran turned away from the towering conscriptor, he only needed to fight his way past a few more men, and he could be running through the woods.

"Make way!" Groddic demanded, and those between him and Galloran hastened to comply.

*Run*, Nedwin mouthed, willing his master to flee.

Galloran hurled a knife at Groddic, which clanged off his rod. "Let's see if you can give me more of a fight than your men did!" Groddic roared.

Galloran charged.

His sword glinting in the moonlight, Galloran pressed Groddic back. The conscriptor was barely quick enough to defend himself as the sword chimed against his war bar. Nedwin felt some of the tension leave his body.

Galloran slashed Groddic across the waist. The conscriptor tripped and fell. As Galloran sprang forward to issue the killing stroke, Groddic flung what looked like a handful of dust into his face. Galloran staggered backward, his sword falling from his hands as he pawed at his eyes.

Nedwin squeezed a branch as Galloran tumbled to the ground. What could Groddic have thrown at his master? Galloran was reacting like his face was on fire.

Using his war bar like a crutch, Groddic rose to his feet. His men surrounded Galloran, poised to pounce. The tall conscriptor gestured for them to wait.

“You’re finished,” the conscriptor told the fallen prince, a gloved hand cradling his bleeding abdomen. “Surrender and I can cool the burning.”

Rolling sideways, Galloran grabbed his sword, rose to a crouch, and lunged, stabbing blindly toward Groddic. The conscriptor sidestepped the thrust, then used his rod to knock the sword from Galloran’s grasp. Enemies surged forward and forced Galloran to the ground.

Nedwin averted his eyes. He could not bear to witness this private moment of shame. Galloran, the hope of all Lyrian, had finally been bested.

Nedwin considered the explosive sphere in his hand. He looked back at Groddic and his soldiers. Barely fifteen remained, and more than a few seemed wounded.

Bowing his head, Nedwin closed his eyes. Galloran had given him specific instructions. He could remember his master’s sober expression as he spoke the words.

“I have learned a precious word of power. Few know that I have been searching for it. Fewer know that I now possess it. This word is vital to our resistance of the emperor. Three syllables are now inscribed in locations known to my allies. I will tell you three others, which you must take to Nicholas of Rosbury. You must never divulge these syllables or let others know I shared them. Our lives, and the fate of Lyrian, depend on it. Should I fall, you must abandon the company and make your way home to Trensicourt with this knowledge. This is why I brought you with us, Nedwin. I regret bestowing this burden on one so young, but you are the most likely to succeed. Should I perish, you must not fail me on this last assignment. I need your word.”

Nedwin had given his word. He remembered the syllables and was committed not to speak them aloud until he could do so privately to Nicholas. Galloran had known he could keep a secret. Galloran had known he could

sneak away if everything went wrong. And Galloran had known that others would not imagine he had entrusted this vital intelligence to one so young.

Nedwin opened his eyes. Galloran had been captured, not killed. He was alive. He had not yet truly fallen.

Groddic knelt beside Galloran, applying salve to his face. Two men held him down, but he no longer struggled. The other men loitered nearby, evidently awestruck that their unconquerable adversary now lay helpless before them.

Groddic stood up, his back to Nedwin. An owl hooted. Nedwin hefted the globe. If he could hit the conscriptor high on the back with an explosive sphere, most of the surrounding men would feel the blast. Groddic's body should shield Galloran from the worst of it. All Nedwin had besides the sphere were a small crossbow and a knife. But with the men newly blinded and injured from the explosion, the knife and crossbow might be enough.

Nedwin tried to muster the courage to burst from hiding, but doubts restrained him. What if he failed and got captured? The precious syllables would be lost. With Galloran in custody, Groddic and his men already had their prize. Nedwin felt confident that if he held still and kept quiet, he could eventually make his way back to Trensicourt and successfully deliver the essential message.

He hesitated. The word of power might be important, but what would become of the resistance without Galloran? Nedwin tried to imagine living with himself if he did nothing to intervene.

Galloran understood how much he mattered, both as a leader of the resistance and as a symbol of hope for all of Lyrian. But when his men had faced execution, he had put himself at risk. Didn't he deserve to have his squire show similar courage?

Nedwin silently eased himself out of his hiding place. If he failed, Galloran would regret having put his trust in him, and the cause he had fought for his entire life would be irreparably damaged. If he succeeded, Galloran could finish his mission and bring down the emperor. So Nedwin only had one option. He had to succeed.

He ran forward swiftly and quietly. As he left the cover of the trees, a couple of heads turned toward him. Groddic still faced away from him, standing over Galloran. Nedwin was not as close as he would have preferred, but Groddic was about to turn, and his men were about to scramble.

Nedwin threw the sphere with all his might. It flew true, straight at Groddic. But the conscriptor reacted to the stares of his men by turning and then catching the sphere in his right hand with an almost casual motion.

Nedwin skidded to a halt.

In order for the sphere to explode, the crystal casing needed to rupture. Groddic had caught it lightly.

Raising his undersized crossbow, Nedwin sighted at the sphere, but an arrow hit Nedwin in the shoulder, and his shot went wild. As he fell, other arrows whizzed past him. On his back, the feathered shaft protruding grotesquely, Nedwin felt despair flooding over him. His master remained an injured prisoner, no vengeance had been achieved, and the invaluable secret Galloran had shared would never reach Nicholas! Enemies gathered around him. Burning with frustration and shame, Nedwin closed his eyes and waited for death.

# ACOLYTE

*Rachel . . . help me . . . Rachel, please!*

Rachel awoke, clutching her covers. She sat up on the soft mattress. Shadows shrouded her bedchamber. The telepathic voice in her head was unfamiliar. The female speaker was not Corinne, and not Ulani, who had recently learned to transmit simple thoughts over short distances.

*Who are you?* Rachel conveyed with all her will.

*Rachel! I can't hang on much longer. . . . Come now . . . please hurry!*

Despite the urgency behind the message, the mental outcry was fading. Rachel had worked with several of the acolytes on speaking in silence, but so far only Ulani had succeeded. Was it possible that in a desperate moment one of the girls had unlocked the ability? Rachel slept in the area of the temple set apart for the acolytes. They were all relatively near. Who else at Mianamon would be able to contact her like this?

Apart from the words in her mind, the night was still. No sounds intruded from outside her room. Mianamon was not under attack. So what was the problem?

*Who is this? What's wrong?*

The words came weakly, the mental equivalent of a whisper. *Kalia. Training room. I tried a strong command. Failed. I hurt all over. . . . Don't tell the others. . . . Please help me.*

Kalia. Rachel had trained with the acolytes for months. Most had only a hint of Edomic talent. None had a natural ability like Rachel, but Kalia was among the more promising. On more than one occasion Rachel had tried to teach her to speak in silence.

*Hold on. I'm coming.*

Speaking an Edomic word, Rachel lit a bedside candle, then rose and shrugged into her acolyte robe. Kalia must have slipped down to the training room in the night for some extra practice. She must have attempted something

too ambitious and lost control of the command. Rachel knew firsthand how debilitating the consequences of a failed Edomic directive could be.

If Kalia could still find the strength to call out mentally, she probably wasn't fatally injured. But that didn't mean she might not *feel* like she was going to die.

Rachel spoke another command, igniting a clay lamp. Picking it up, she unlocked her door and stepped into the hallway.

Darkness awaited beyond her lamplight in both directions. Rachel was not accustomed to roaming the Temple of Mianamon after-hours. She and her friends had been here for the whole winter, but she had never walked these stone corridors when all was dark and empty. The familiar passage suddenly seemed ominous.

*Still there, Kalia?*

No response came. The acolyte could be unconscious. Or she might simply lack the energy to send another message.

Rachel passed several doors. No life could be heard behind them. No light seeped through the cracks. After rounding a corner, she reached the stairway that led down to the training room. Beyond the bubble of light from her lamp, all was silent shadow. Rachel knew that outside the section of the temple reserved for acolytes, she could find the human guards who protected their privacy at all hours. She also knew where she could find Jason, Drake, or her other companions. Or she could call out mentally to Galloran or Corinne.

But the painful experience of a failed command was best kept private. Kalia would not appreciate others seeing her in an injured, weakened state. Straightening her shoulders, Rachel started down the stairs. She arrived at the bottom and moved along a broad hallway.

The darkness retreated from her approach until Rachel reached the door to the main training room. It was slightly ajar. Rachel nudged it open and stepped inside.

"Kalia?"

A vehement Edomic command answered her inquiry. The words demanded that Rachel hold still. As requested, her muscles locked up, leaving her temporarily immobilized.

Rachel knew this command! The acolytes of Mianamon practiced an Edomic discipline that enabled them to issue directives to people. Upon her arrival at Mianamon, Rachel had known how to use Edomic to get some animals to heed certain instructions, but she had never guessed that she might be able to use similar tactics on humans.



Commanding inanimate matter with Edomic was straightforward—all matter and energy understood the language. You simply needed to accompany the proper words with enough focused willpower to demand compliance. If you tried to accomplish too much, you would fail and face a backlash of physical and psychic traumas.

With animals it was trickier. Edomic did not work well on living things. Instead of compelling animals, you had to make suggestions that they could either heed or disregard. Ask too gently and the animal would ignore the directive. Push too hard and you risked the consequences of a failed command.

Humans were even more complicated. You couldn't really use Edomic on the mind. You couldn't implant a complex idea. It was more like speaking to the spine, suggesting a reflexive response that the mind would counter once it caught up. Rachel now knew roughly fifty suggestions that might work on a human, most of them at the level of dog commands: stay, lie down, turn around, jump. In a moment of distress, Rachel knew, the ability to cause an enemy to temporarily freeze or flop to the ground might prove very useful.

Rachel had practiced this discipline for months. None of the acolytes could match her skill at it. For instance, most of the girls could not demand any form of compliance from Ulani, but Rachel could freeze her with a word. Conversely, even the most capable acolytes couldn't make Rachel do much more than twitch.

Except now she couldn't move!

The command had been uttered with power and expertise. It held her like no command had since her first day of training. Was her guard down because of fear? Sure, she was scared, but she was resisting the mandate the same way she had practiced. It just wasn't working.

Rachel heard another muttered command. A black metal spike streaked toward her chest, gleaming in the light of her lamp.

Rachel still couldn't move. Instead, she spoke in silence. Rachel had lots of practice moving physical objects. She telepathically ordered the spike to hold still. It stopped just over a foot from her chest, quivering in midair.

More words issued from the shadows beyond her lamplight. A robust will contended with hers, inching the spike toward her. Rachel had regained control of her body, but she didn't want to advertise her recovery to her enemy. Instead, Rachel bore down and pushed the spike away. The will of her enemy broke, and the spike went sailing into a wall.

Rachel knew the location of many torches, cressets, and lamps in this room. With a word she illuminated several at once. The light displayed Kalia charging toward her, a knife in one hand, a long needle in the other.

Rachel commanded Kalia to fall to the floor. The acolyte obeyed, losing hold of her knife. Kalia tried to compel Rachel to freeze again. The expertly phrased directive worked for a fraction of a second, but Rachel was ready this time, and promptly reasserted control. She then countered by commanding Kalia to be still.

“What are you doing?” Rachel spat.

Kalia remained immobile for barely a second. The girl rolled over and looked up, red spittle leaking from one corner of her mouth. Rachel realized that when Kalia had lost control of the spike, the resulting failure must have injured her.

Kalia growled a command, and the knife darted at Rachel. Ducking to the side, Rachel seized control of the knife and put it to the throat of the acolyte. Holding it there took great control, but Rachel had practiced manipulating physical objects more diligently than any other Edomic discipline.

“Why?” Rachel demanded, panting.

Kalia spat blood. Sweat dampened her face. Her feral eyes were panicked and angry. Kalia was among the younger acolytes. Although she looked to be in her twenties, she was actually closer to fifty. Acolytes employed routine Edomic meditation to slow the aging process.

“Why?” Rachel repeated.

Kalia spoke a command, trying to seize control of the knife, but Rachel countered with a stern mandate, and Kalia’s effort dissolved, crushed by a superior will. Rachel angled the knife away as the acolyte doubled over, writhing in pain. The failed commands were taking a heavy toll.

“When did you get so good?” Rachel demanded. “You never moved objects.”

*I never spoke in silence, either.* The furious words burned in Rachel’s mind. *He should have given the order earlier, before you had so much training. I could have taken you when you first arrived. I know I could have!*

*Who ordered this?* Rachel pressed.

*Use your imagination,* Kalia communicated, her rage diminishing. *My only solace is that he’ll get you yet. I chose the winning side. He asked too much of me at the wrong time. Bad for me. But it won’t save you. Mark my words. He’ll get you all.*

*You work for Maldor?*

*He’ll kill every last one of you!*

Galloran burst into the room, his blindfold off, his torivorian sword drawn, several treefolk and human guards following in his wake. He looked from Rachel to Kalia. *I sensed a great deal of Edomic in use.*

Kalia jabbed the long needle into her thigh.

*What have you done?* Rachel asked.

*Another inane question! How does such a simpleton access so much power? It's infuriating! It's disgusting!* Kalia began to convulse. Red foam frothed from her lips.

"She tried to kill me," Rachel explained, turning away in horror and disgust.

Galloran took her lamp, set it aside, then wrapped his arms around her. Rachel felt embarrassed that he must feel her trembling. But she was not embarrassed enough to reject the comfort. *I'm so sorry, Rachel. I never would have guessed Maldor could have planted an assassin at Mianamon.*

*Where can't he come after us? This is the one place in Lyrian where I felt safe!*

*The sad truth is that no place in Lyrian is secure anymore, no matter how remote. And the problem will only worsen. We've been planning to leave soon. Let's make it tomorrow. We have stood still for too long.*

Rachel clung to Galloran, wishing she could disappear. Kalia had set a trap and tried to kill her!

A man covered from head to toe in moss brought the knife and the iron spike to Galloran. "Both poisoned. Giantsbane. Just like the needle."

"Later," Galloran said. He waved a hand. "Leave us."

The men and treefolk exited the training room.

"I'm so sorry, Rachel," Galloran said again, still holding her.

Rachel felt bad for the amount of pain in his voice. "It wasn't your fault. Thanks for coming so quickly."

"I was a fool for allowing you to room so far from the rest of us. I should have foreseen this possibility. Thank goodness you saved yourself. I could feel the strength behind her commands. This traitor was no novice. I did not know that any Edomic adepts of her ability remained. She must have hidden here for a long while."

"More than thirty years," Ulani said, entering the room. She glared bitterly at the fallen acolyte, then shifted her attention to Rachel. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right," Rachel managed. "It's all right."

Galloran continued to hold Rachel close. "Maldor must have known we were preparing to leave. He wanted to strike before we departed."

Rachel scowled a little, pulling back from the embrace. “Why didn’t the oracle know about her? Why didn’t Esmira see this coming?”

“I wish she had,” Galloran said.

“I never sensed any evil in Kalia,” Ulani said. “Nor did I perceive unusual power. Potential, yes, but unrealized. Perhaps Kalia knew how to shield her mind from scrutiny. Perhaps Maldor only got to her recently. We may never know. Esmira saw many things, but I can’t imagine she spent much time looking for traitors among us. We were too isolated, too united against the emperor and all he stands for.”

“He tried to kill me,” Rachel said in a small voice.

After a final hard look at the body on the floor, Galloran tied his blindfold in place. Apparently, he didn’t want any more details to reach Maldor through his displacer eyes. “Maldor would have rejoiced at your death. But he has some idea of your abilities. He should have recognized that this Kalia, although talented, was probably not up to the challenge. This attack may have simply been a test.”

Rachel huffed softly. “Rough test.”

“Maldor knows no gentle games.” Galloran put an arm around her shoulders. “Try not to let this rattle you. Take solace that you rose to the occasion. Thankfully, we’ve kept the details of the prophecy from all at Mianamon save Ulani. Even so, Maldor knows exactly where we are and may have deduced some of our intentions. As we embark on our quests, we’ll all have trials to face in the coming days. I fear this is only the beginning.”

# MIANAMON

From his perch hundreds of feet above the temple floor, Jason watched a pair of apes circle each other, quarterstaves held ready. The simian combatants stepped gingerly, slender torsos hunched, long limbs coiled. The taller of the white gibbons stood roughly the same height as Jason. Screeching and hooting, they rushed together, elongated forms wielding the staffs with fluid agility. Many other apes watched the duel, close-set eyes fixed on the fiercely clacking rods.

The white gibbons had been engineered by Certius, the ill-fated wizard who had made his home in the southern jungles of Lyrian. Although the gibbons lacked the power of speech, they had surprising intelligence, and communicated with humans using hand gestures.

Iron lattices covered many of the higher walls and ceilings within the Temple of Mianamon. The gibbons could travel across the framework with careless grace, leaping and swinging, dangling from hands or feet, heedless of the potential fall. They mostly resided on lofty shelves near the summit of the temple. Jason had made it up here using a cramped system of tunnels, stairways, and ladders.

Observing the apes was one of his favorite pastimes at Mianamon. He had taught them to hold batting practice using quarterstaves and citrus fruit. He could seldom get an ape to strike out. Changeups worked best.

Today the brawling apes failed to distract Jason. Rods cracked, gibbons hooted, but he watched from a distance, alone, his mind far from the playful sparring. After several months, this would be his last day at Mianamon. Within hours he would part with Rachel and Galloran and many of his other friends. Their season of rest and preparation had been shattered when Rachel was ambushed last night. With little warning, suddenly they had to leave.

Jason watched the skillful apes without any pleasure at all. So why was he here? Had he thought the apes might hold solutions to his troubles? Of course not. Then what was he doing? Sulking? Hiding?

Jason had spent more days at this tropical temple than the rest of his time in Lyrian combined. He had turned fourteen at some point, though he couldn't be certain which day, since the passage of time between his world and Lyrian was out of sync. Further complicating matters, the calendar in Lyrian had ten months, each with thirty-eight days.

Winter in the jungle had never grown cold. The days had gotten a little shorter, the air less warm on occasion, the rainfall more persistent, but Jason had never needed a heavy cloak. He had spent much of the winter training with weapons. Ferrin, Drake, Aram, Corinne, and Jasher had been working directly with Galloran, and they had in turn provided instruction to Jason, Tark, Nia, Io, and Farfalee.

Jason was a much improved swordsman. He could now make a respectable showing against Ferrin or Drake on the practice field. Farfalee had helped him with archery, Nedwin had offered lessons in knife work, and Io had tutored him in wrestling. For the first time, Jason felt he might be able to contribute in a fight, rather than desperately hope to survive until the others got the job done. In theory he would be more useful than ever. Could his new combat skills be part of the reason the oracle had placed so much importance on his participation in the upcoming quest?

"Catching one last ape battle?" a voice asked, making Jason jump and turn. It was Rachel, looking mystical in her acolyte robes. He hadn't seen her since the incident, and although Galloran had reassured him that she was fine, it was a relief to see she truly looked unharmed.

"Some people build model ships. Some pop bubble wrap. I'm more into dueling gibbons."

"Ferrin was looking for you."

"I was going to come down. Eventually." He tried to think of a smooth way to bring up the attempt on her life. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I didn't get stabbed. I'm about how you'd expect."

"I'm so sorry that happened."

"I talked to Galloran. He helped. I'd honestly rather not dwell on it." Rachel sighed, eyes on the apes. "Can you believe we're leaving?"

"Not really. I knew it was coming, but still . . . I wish I felt more ready."

"How do you get ready to save the world or die trying?"

"I guess that's the problem." Jason stood, stretching his arms and legs. It felt good. He must have held the same position for longer than he had realized. "Are you wearing those robes out of here? Planning to do some trick-or-treating?"

Rachel chuckled, looking down at herself. "I'll wear Amar Kabal robes for the road. But I'm bringing these, too. Galloran thinks they make me look more wizardly."

"Don't dress for the job you have—dress for the job you want."

"I guess that's the idea. Maybe I should dress up as an innocent bystander."

"Too late for that." Jason stared down at his feet. He was going to miss her. Rachel's hand clasped his and he glanced up. Her eyes looked a little misty. He scowled. "Don't get all sentimental."

"I hate that we have to split up."

"If you can't trust an old lady packed in clay and dipped in perfume, who can you trust?" With her dying words, the oracle had established that Rachel, Galloran, Io, Ferrin, Nedwin, Nollin, and Tark had to depart on one quest while Jason, Farfalee, Jasher, Drake, Aram, Corinne, and Nia left on another. While Rachel was off trying to raise an army to attack Felrook, Jason would be seeking crucial information from an ancient seer. According to the oracle, both quests needed to succeed in order to defeat Maldor.

"That really is what we're doing," Rachel sighed. "We're placing our lives in the hands of some old lady packed in clay."

"I didn't mean to insult her," Jason amended. "Everyone says she was a true oracle. She seemed legit."

"She's the same lady who sent Galloran on the quest for the Word. Look how that ended up! He suffered so much based on a false hope!"

Jason shrugged. "Do you have a better idea?"

"Not really. But just because the oracle proposed a plan doesn't necessarily make it perfect. One of her people tried to kill me! How'd she miss that? I've been working with the top acolytes. They've taught me some Edomic words, but I can already use the commands better than any of them. I wouldn't trust most of them to foresee what I'm having for breakfast tomorrow. What if the oracle wasn't as wise and magical as everybody thinks? Or what if she went crazy? Farfalee told us that Darian the Pyromancer lived ages ago. He should be dead. What if he is? And Felrook seems invincible. What if we're all marching to our doom, thanks to the desperate ramblings of a dying crackpot?"

The possible validity of her doubts made Jason uncomfortable. "You're probably just spooked because of last night."

"This isn't just about that," Rachel said. "I've been getting more stressed ever since the oracle spoke. I wanted to believe her. She seemed confident and sincere. She gave us hope. I've tried to be positive and to focus on my training.

But with us about to actually leave, I feel less certain than ever. I needed to tell someone.”

“And you picked me? I’m honored.”

“I was thinking maybe we could go talk to Galloran.”

“We? When did I sign on as a doubter?”

Rachel scowled skeptically. “You aren’t nervous?”

“Sure, I’m nervous! But that’s not the same as deciding it’s a mistake.” Jason paused. He wasn’t ready to do cartwheels of joy at the prospect of leaving Mianamon, but in spite of his insecurities he found he really did feel they were doing the right thing. That was something, at least. “You really want to bug Galloran with this on the day we’re supposed to leave?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said uncomfortably. “I’d hate to be part of a train wreck just because I was too scared to speak up.”

“Getting attacked in the middle of the night would freak out anybody. I can understand how it could make you question the oracle.”

“That’s only part of it. I worry that we’re betting everything on this one opinion. Are we really sure she got it right?”

Jason glanced at a hooting gibbon as it triumphantly raised its quarterstaff in the air. “Tell me what you would tell him.”

“Not if you’re just going to watch the gibbons.”

“Sorry. I like how they celebrate. Go ahead. This is actually a great place for a private talk. I’m paying attention.”

Avoiding his gaze, Rachel tugged self-consciously on her sleeves and cleared her throat. “Okay. Galloran, I’m worried that the oracle may not have made an accurate prediction. I mean, she sent you after the Word, and that didn’t turn out so great. She didn’t know that one of her students was an assassin. She was dying when she spoke to us. What if her mind was foggy? What if she was just desperate?”

“You’re worried that Felrook can’t be taken?” Jason checked.

Rachel shrugged. “I know we have an opportunity. Maldor’s main armies are in the east, fighting Kadara. Since Maldor isn’t worried about anyone attacking him, Felrook isn’t heavily defended. But what if he’s right not to worry? Nobody thought Felrook could be taken until the oracle told us to do it. If she was wrong, the last armies resisting Maldor will be crushed! And the other group won’t have it any easier.”

“We have to do impossible stuff too,” Jason agreed.

“What if this is like the Word? What if we’re heading down a false trail?”



“We’ll all die,” Jason said honestly.

“And you’re okay with that?” Rachel blustered.

“I’m not okay with dying,” Jason said. She clearly needed reassurance. It was hard to tell what would help her. He had plenty of his own concerns, but at least he felt convinced that their quests were necessary. “Normally, I wouldn’t risk my life for anything. But these aren’t normal circumstances. I get that we really could die—we’ve already lost people we know. The oracle never promised we’d make it. She didn’t promise we’d succeed, either. But she did say that our only chance for winning would be to follow her instructions. Her words were good enough for Galloran. They were good enough for the drinlings. They were even good enough for the Amar Kabal, and you know how careful they are.”

“But how do *I* know the oracle got it right?” Rachel asked, almost pleading.

Jason considered her question. “You know better than anyone how Galloran can look into minds.”

“We talk without speaking all the time,” Rachel said. “He even sometimes does it when I’m not communicating with him on purpose.”

“Don’t you think he was making sure the oracle was being straight with us?” Jason asked. “Don’t you think he was watching her mind the whole time? You know how smart he is, how cautious. He’s been burned before. And he’s convinced.”

“True,” Rachel admitted.

“You spoke with the oracle, just like the rest of us. She knew things about us that she couldn’t have known unless she was the real deal. She was the oracle here for a long time. Everybody accepted her as authentic. She didn’t promise we’d win, but I’m sure that what she told us is true. Basically, if we want to save Lyrian, we have to do this, even though it’ll be brutal.”

“She warned that even if we won, many of us wouldn’t make it,” Rachel reminded him. “And she told us that we would probably fail.”

“True,” Jason said. “But we fail for sure if we don’t try.”

Rachel nodded thoughtfully. She looked into his eyes. “You’re convinced?”

Jason found himself turning inward, taking her question seriously. Sure, he had been looking for arguments to reassure her, but it was more than just that. He realized that he really believed what he was saying. This needed to happen. It felt true in his gut, in his bones, right down to his core. “Yeah, I am.”

“So I shouldn’t bother Galloran?”

“Depends why you want to talk to him. If you need reassurance from him, go ahead. But you’re not going to point out any doubts he hasn’t already

considered. He knows the stakes, and he made his choice.”

Rachel sighed, her whole body sagging. “Maybe you’re right. It isn’t like I realized some specific danger that everyone overlooked. I guess I’m mostly nervous about leaving, and I let that make me paranoid.”

“You’re not alone. I get worried too. At least you’ve become the ninja wizard girl. You’ll probably make a big difference out there.”

“And you won’t?”

Jason shrugged, trying not to let his worries show. “I hope so. I’m just not sure how.”

“You’ve done so much. I can’t picture you very nervous.”

Jason smiled. “I’m glad you can’t imagine me that way. But I’m all wound up, too. Why do you think I’m hiding out up here when I should be packing? Just because these quests are the right thing to do doesn’t mean they won’t be hard.”

“Or maybe even impossible.”

“We can’t think that way. We’ll psych ourselves out.”

Rachel nodded. “All right. I guess you’ve talked me off the ledge.”

Jason glanced at the enormous drop to the temple floor. “Were you going to jump?”

“I didn’t mean literally. Wanting to die isn’t my problem.”

“Good. The slow way down makes a lot more sense. You sure you’re okay?”

Her smile looked a little forced. “Depends what you mean by okay. Am I looking forward to leaving? No. Do I wish I could go hide under a rock? Yes. Will I do my duty? I don’t really have another choice. I can’t abandon everybody, and I can’t deny that this is the right thing to do.”

Jason nodded. “That’s what it comes down to. Difficult or not, scary or not, it’s the right choice. Our friends need us. Lyrian needs us. We have to keep going.”

Her smile became sweeter, more natural. “Thanks, Jason. I needed this. You can be pretty impressive sometimes. Now I don’t have to embarrass myself by bothering Galloran. I’ll find a way to keep it together. Are you done up here? Should we head down?”

“I guess.” Following her to a ladder, Jason turned to look back. “So much for my farewell ape fights.”

\* \* \*

While descending from the heights of the temple, Jason and Rachel found Ferrin awaiting them near the base of a long ladder. Dressed for travel, he

leaned against the wall, balancing his dagger on his fingertip. “Jason,” the displacer greeted, sheathing the knife. “I was beginning to worry you had been made an honorary gibbon.”

“I heard you were looking for me,” Jason replied.

“Can we take a walk?”

Jason looked to Rachel.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I have some things to gather. I’ll see you when we meet up to leave.” She started down a nearby flight of stairs.

Ferrin led Jason to a high terrace that wrapped around the outside of the temple. They walked beside a waist-high parapet, the jungle spread out below them. Under the direct sunlight, the temperature climbed from uncomfortably warm to hot. The humid smell of vegetation filled Jason’s nostrils. “Seems to be getting hotter every day.”

“Spring will do that,” Ferrin replied. “Winter is ending.”

“What’s up?”

Ferrin winced. “We’re about to go our separate ways.”

“I know. Part of me never wanted this day to come. It’s been nice to spend some time without death and destruction around every corner.”

“It’s been there waiting all along. But I know what you mean. Mianamon has provided a welcome season of relief. I’ve enjoyed the chance to observe your nature when you’re not under duress.”

“That makes me feel like the subject of an experiment.”

Ferrin shrugged. “If you were, the experiment was a success. You’re a good person, Jason. A true friend.”

Jason felt unsure how to respond. He had never heard Ferrin give compliments lightly. “Thanks. You are too. You’ll keep an eye on Rachel?”

“The one I have left,” he said, tapping his eye patch. “Do you realize what awaits you at the Celestine Library?”

“I’ve heard the basics. Zokar placed a guardian there.”

“Right. I went over this with Galloran and Farfalee, and I know they’ve spoken with you, but I want to make sure you fully understand. Zokar was obsessed with the torivors. Rightfully so—they’re probably the most powerful beings in Lyrian. He spent years attempting to create a race of similar prowess. The results became known as his Abominations.”

“And one of them protects the library.”

“Zokar never felt he had perfected his Abominations. There were three, each unique, each less governable than he desired. He never turned them into races

because he feared they would usurp his power. One was a sinister being with an extraordinary gift for invading thoughts and dreams. It was dubbed the Visitor, and Zokar eventually destroyed it. Some historians cite evidence that Zokar was never the same after besting the Visitor, and argue that the confrontation may have permanently disrupted his sanity.”

“I wish I were an evil wizard,” Jason complained. “They have all the fun.”

“The second creation was a shape-shifter. It was called the Wanderer. Zokar tried to eliminate it, but the shape-shifter escaped and vanished. None know its fate.”

“And the third?”

“It was known as the Maumet. In form it was like a torivor, but considerably larger. The Maumet can transform itself into any material it touches. Zokar successfully imprisoned the Maumet on Windbreak Island.”

“The same island as the Celestine Library.”

“Correct. None have entered the library since that time. Many have tried. Eldrin was not one of them.”

Jason frowned. “But after Eldrin defeated Zokar, didn’t he go on a rampage destroying books?”

“Good memory,” Ferrin approved. “Eldrin decided to rid Lyrian of wizardry, and sought to destroy all the books that taught Edomic. Of the great storehouses of learning, only the Celestine Library remained untouched. Even the legendary Eldrin chose not to confront the Maumet. What does that tell you?”

“The Maumet is tough.”

“It intimidated the most powerful wizard Lyrian has known. It got between him and his mission, and he let it stay there.”

“He might have figured the Maumet would be able to guard that information forever,” Jason said.

“All indications have shown that he would have been correct,” Ferrin said. “Maldor has sent several teams to retrieve information from the Celestine Library. None have succeeded. I’ve heard that the only way to harm the Maumet is to chip off pieces. Sort of the opposite of me.” He casually detached one hand at the wrist, flipped it into the air, then caught it on the stump at the end of his forearm. The hand fused seamlessly back into place.

“So if we chop off an arm, the arm is gone.”

“Supposedly, the Maumet never regenerates lost material. But this is all speculative. Nobody has ever severed a limb. To my knowledge nobody has ever seriously harmed it.”

Jason stared out over the steaming jungle. “And we need to find a way.”

“The oracle tasked Galloran with regaining control of Trensicourt, raising an army, and mounting a direct assault on the emperor’s impenetrable stronghold. If you ask me, Galloran has the easy job.”

“Rachel seems pretty nervous,” Jason said. “She was worried the oracle might have been wrong.”

“I don’t think the oracle was wrong.”

“No?”

“No. She was authentic. I expect that her prediction was valid. Remember, she wasn’t promising victory. She was looking for any possible route to victory, no matter how faint. I’m sure if you can somehow access the library, there is a chance of finding a way to contact Darian the Seer, even though he is supposed to be dead. Those strong enough in Edomic have found methods to achieve astonishing life spans. And it is conceivable that the famed pyromancer could provide some arcane information that might help an attack on Felrook succeed. I can’t begin to imagine what that information could be. And I doubt that any knowledge could make such a victory likely.”

“This isn’t sounding good,” Jason said, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach.

“We asked if, among all the possible futures, there might be a one-in-a-billion chance of turning the tide and dethroning Maldor. I’m sure the oracle found what Galloran sought: a theoretically possible, but highly unlikely, path to victory.”

Jason rubbed his wrist anxiously. “In other words, we won’t just probably fail—we’ll almost certainly fail. You’re still willing to go along with it?”

“If Maldor ever apprehends me, my fate is certain. Just like you and Galloran and the Amar Kabal, I’d take a minuscule chance at victory over certain doom. If we fail, I can still try to jump ship and hide in the wilderness for the rest of my life, which is my only other current option.”

Jason shifted uncomfortably. “You’re warning me that my quest probably ends with the Maumet.”

“I want you to appreciate what you’re up against. You will have to succeed where multitudes have failed. You’ll have to accomplish something that the mightiest wizard in the history of Lyrian didn’t dare to attempt. You’ve pulled off some shocking upsets in the past, but only a fool would bet on you this time. So I will.” Ferrin detached an ear and held it out to Jason.

“You’re betting an ear?”

“I’m betting that not only will you find a way past the Maumet, but that you will locate Darian the Pyromancer and need to offer us crucial information from a great distance. If you perish, I’ll just have to get used to life with one eye and one ear.”

“Farfalee is bringing messenger eagles,” Jason reminded him.

“I know, and they will serve as an important redundancy, but nothing beats sure, instantaneous communication.”

Jason accepted the ear. It represented a great deal of trust. Too much trust, maybe? Could Ferrin have other motives? They had spoken frankly about his allegiance issues on other occasions. “What if you betray us?”

Ferrin flashed a crooked smile. “The oracle had the same concern.”

“She did?”

“In our private conversation. She told me that I could be either a vital asset or a crippling traitor. She assured me that Maldor would never accept me, that any treachery would end in my ruin, things I already know. Things she needed me to believe.”

Jason held up the ear. “This is your attempt to help us?”

“Part of it,” Ferrin said. “If we mount an attack on Felrook, I have a lot of information that could prove advantageous. Assuming Galloran can muster his army, and you can accomplish your role, I’ll help see this through.”

“Are you sure?” Jason asked. “Are you really on our side? Totally?”

Ferrin raised his eyebrows. “It’s possible that you would learn a vital secret, speak it to my ear, and I would take the information straight to Maldor in search of forgiveness. Such an act of betrayal could enable the emperor to counter whatever secret tactic Darian might suggest, even if the messenger eagles still deliver the information to Galloran.”

Jason resisted an impulse to fling the ear into the jungle. “I know you think like that. Do you have to be so open about it?”

“Would you prefer I kept those thoughts private?”

“I wish you’d quit having those thoughts at all. It’s a scary sort of honesty when you openly admit you might betray us.”

Ferrin lifted his hands apologetically. “I’ve plotted like this my entire life. I like you enough that I try to be candid.”

“It’s not just that you have those urges. I know you’re capable of carrying them out.”

Ferrin laughed darkly. “Makes me a lousy teammate. But the oracle indicated that we need to stand together or else none of this will work. Doesn’t that mean

you have to rely on me?"

"I want to count on you. You've picked us over Maldor before."

Ferrin held up a finger. "Back before I really knew the stakes, I picked you over the chance of upsetting Maldor if I got caught. Then the situation spiraled out of control. But I see what you mean. If I wanted to ruin your cause, I could have already done so."

"True," Jason said, "but that gives us no guarantee about what you might do tomorrow. I'd feel better if you promised me you won't turn on us."

"Haven't you heard? The word of a displacer is worthless. There is a whole family of jokes on the subject."

"I can't judge the other displacers," Jason said. "I've barely known any. You're the only one I really know. Ever since Whitelake, you've been really honest with me. Even when you turned in me and Rachel, you were open about it. You've stuck your neck out for me. Your word means something to me."

Turning to gaze out at the horizon, Ferrin gave a slight nod. "Very well, Jason. I swear that I will continue to support this rebellion. I gave part of my carotid artery to Galloran in token of my sincerity, and part of my brachial artery to you. With that ear, I'm running out of body parts to spare."

Jason pocketed the ear. He would put it in the same pouch as the artery. "The ear will be good to have. Imagine if something happened to the eagles!"

"The possibility had crossed my mind."

"This will be one-way communication," Jason realized. "I won't be able to hear from you. How will I know you're listening?"

"I'll be listening," Ferrin assured him. "Unless I die, in which case the cross-dimensional connection will be severed, and the ear will leak blood and grow cold. It would be hard to miss."

"Right. Hey, speaking of broken connections, I have a displacerly question."

"Then I probably have an answer."

"Two displacers gave Galloran their eyes," Jason established.

"Yes."

"What if they die? Would his eyes rot?"

"A fair question," Ferrin said. "Can Galloran see out of those eyes?"

"Of course."

"And the displacers can too, which means he has a shared grafting. In a shared grafting, the mutual body part is simultaneously supported by both organisms. If Galloran dies, the eyes can draw from the displacers to remain alive and functional. If the displacers die, the eyes will lose their cross-

dimensional connection and become the sole property of Galloran. They should remain healthy and serviceable. Displacers have been hunted and killed so a person could become the sole owner of a grafting. It makes our kind think twice before we share a body part.”

“That’s good to know,” Jason said. “I was kind of worried about him.”

“There are plenty of reasons to worry about Galloran,” Ferrin replied. “Rotten eyeballs is not one of them.”

“Thanks for the info.” Jason realized that this might be the last time he spoke to Ferrin in private before parting ways. “Take care of yourself.”

“I always do.” Ferrin placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder and looked him in the eye. “Jason, I wasn’t joking that I’m betting on you. I’m wagering everything. This will be tough all around. Find a way to get your part done. I believe in you.”

Jason swallowed. He didn’t want to ask the question, but he couldn’t resist. “Why?”

“Excuse me?”

Jason looked away, toward the carved wall of the building. “Nothing. I’ve just been stressing out lately. I don’t get why the oracle would count on me so much.”

Ferrin nodded reflectively. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“The odds are against you. You’d be a fool if you went into this feeling overconfident.”

“So why would you bet on me?”

Ferrin looked at Jason shrewdly. “For my part in this to succeed, your part must succeed. The odds are against us, but even if the chance is minuscule, we still have one. You’ve accomplished some amazing things. You’ve performed well under pressure. You’ve shown conviction and integrity. Maybe it’s not realistic, but it’s bold, and necessary, so I’m willing to believe you can pull this off.”

“Okay,” Jason managed, his throat thick with emotion. “I’ll believe in you, too.”



# DEPARTURE

Rachel stood before a full-length mirror in her room. Turning left and right, she supposed her acolyte robe did look kind of like a Halloween costume, but not a cheap one. Made of fine material, the robe felt silky and comfortable, and it gave off a faint shimmer, as if silver threads had been woven into the dark-gray fabric. Light and billowy, the robe stayed surprisingly cool considering how much of her body it covered.

She shed the fine robe, folded it neatly, and began dressing for her upcoming journey. Though less silky, her Amar Kabal robes were also comfortable. The acolyte robe was great for roaming enclosed hallways, but would prove restrictive for running or riding. The more rugged Amar Kabal robes made much more sense for travel.

A soft knock made Rachel turn. "Come in."

The door to her bedchamber opened, and Ulani entered, wearing a gray acolyte robe accented by a silver mantle, which designated her as the future oracle. Few people made Rachel feel tall, but Ulani was one of them. Short and slight, the woman looked to be about forty, although Rachel knew that her real age was closer to a hundred. A circlet of violet blossoms ringed her head.

Ulani spoke a brief Edomic phrase. Rachel's initial reaction was to flinch, but the words were an appeal for Rachel to stay, and carried many subtle nuances. Rachel belonged with them, had a promising future with them. Her departure would wound many hearts and lead her into perilous circumstances. Sometimes Rachel wished that Edomic weren't quite so expressive.

"I don't want to leave," Rachel apologized in plain English. "I've enjoyed studying and training here. You of all people should understand why I have to go."

Ulani nodded. "Your departure was ordained by the oracle. She also privately wished for you to return."

Rachel paused. "I might."

Ulani narrowed her gaze. "I do not foresee it."

“Have you . . . looked?”

“Not prophetically. I would never be able to see beyond the upcoming conflict with Maldor. I simply realize that you yearn for your home more than you aspire to serve with us here.”

“I don’t really belong to this world,” Rachel apologized. “I know my parents are worried about me. They may have given up hope by now.”

“For decades I have toiled to develop my talents,” Ulani said. “I was disciplined. The oracle tutored me. And in a few short months you have surpassed all that I accomplished. You have the innate gift. You could become a true prophetess, perhaps greater than Esmira.”

“That’s too much praise,” Rachel replied. “I was never tested to discover if I could see beyond the present.”

“Only because Galloran forbade it,” Ulani said. “Not without reason. The test can be fatal. But you display every indication of one who would more than excel. The oracle herself sensed your potential. You’ve already mastered everything else we could teach you.”

“I’m no master,” Rachel corrected.

“You’re much better at our disciplines than those of us who have studied them our entire lives,” Ulani insisted. “I think you’re already even more adept than the oracle was.”

The praise made Rachel blush. “I’m very grateful for all I’ve learned.”

“It was our privilege to host you.” Ulani lowered her gaze. “I’m very sorry about Kalia. She brought shame upon us all. This should have been a haven for you.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Rachel said. “Maldor finds ways to harm whoever he wants, wherever they are.”

“It was our duty to protect you. Instead, you had to defend yourself against one of our own. It’s inexcusable.”

“I don’t blame you.” Rachel took Ulani’s hand. “Everything else has been wonderful. These have been the best weeks I’ve spent in Lyrian.”

Ulani nodded and offered an apologetic smile. “It will be lonely here without you.”

Rachel knew that Ulani felt trapped. She had nowhere near the raw ability that the previous oracle had possessed. Yet everyone expected her to become the next great prophetess, to guide the children of Certius through the troubled years to come, and to keep the peace among the different factions of treefolk.

“You have a lot to deal with,” Rachel said. “Don’t underestimate yourself. You’ll do great.”

Tears brimmed briefly in Ulani’s eyes. The head acolyte replied with a slight nod that showed little confidence. “We each have our duties.”

Rachel rested a finger beside her temple. “I see lots of walking in my future.”

Ulani smiled. “I hardly know you in those barbaric clothes.”

“Function before fashion. I’ll miss you.”

Ulani’s mouth twitched. No words came out. She nodded again, turned, and left the room.

Rachel swiveled to face the mirror. Ulani had finally voiced what many of the other acolytes had hinted at for weeks. After months spent practicing together, they knew how quickly Rachel learned, and regarded her with wary awe. Even the most jealous ones seemed to recognize Rachel as the greatest among them. Uncertain times were looming. The acolytes did not want to lose her. She had never felt so needed.

Did anyone rely on her like this back home? Her parents loved her, and certainly missed her, but did they *need* her? Not the way the people in Lyrian needed her. As her abilities increased, her role here in Lyrian would only grow more significant.

*Are you busy?* The words reached her mind as clearly as if spoken.

*Come in.*

The door opened and Corinne entered, honey-blond hair tied back, her robes fitting like she had been prepped for a photo shoot. *I saw Ulani leave.* Corinne’s room was not far down the hall.

*She was saying her good-byes. What have you been up to today?*

*I was helping Father,* Corinne conveyed. *We were sending messages to our allies. We won’t have easy access to messenger eagles again until we reach Trensicourt. I’ll miss them. They’re such intelligent, impressive birds. How are you feeling?*

*I’ve been tense,* Rachel admitted. *I had a good talk with Jason. It helped.*

*We live in very difficult times,* Corinne conveyed. *None would envy us.*

*I’m not looking forward to the good-byes,* Rachel expressed.

Corinne closed her eyes. The words came clearly to Rachel, laden with heartache. *I understand, Rachel. I’ll miss you too. And the others. I have grown comfortable here. Resting. Sparring. Socializing. I may never see my father again after today.*

*I can’t think about all the separations,* Rachel replied sympathetically. *It’s too much. I’ve been dreading this. I don’t feel ready.* Not only was she going to miss her

friends, but many parts of the prophecy left her full of unsettling doubts and questions.

Corinne opened her eyes. *I know! Why do oracles have to be so cryptic?*

*I didn't share that on purpose,* Rachel responded. Like her father, Corinne was growing increasingly adept at perceiving unshared thoughts.

*Sorry,* Corinne apologized. *I couldn't help sensing your attitude. I know that Father has puzzled over every word. For example, what servant will betray what master? Could be almost anyone.*

Rachel nodded. *I can't resist searching for clues in her final words. She said our hope would be red like the blood of heroes, black as the bowels of the earth, and white like a flash of orantium. Is there some hidden message we need to deduce from that? Or was she just confirming that some of us will die and orantium will help in our battles?*

*It could be worse,* Corinne comforted her. *Some prophecies can be hopelessly vague. At least we know a few things for sure. We know that we have to split up. We know who goes where and generally what they must do. As for the rest? Good luck figuring out which secret from the past will ransom the future.*

*Maybe we'll know it when we come across it.*

*Let's hope so. Do you need more alone time?*

Rachel scanned her room, realizing that it truly felt like *her* room. It was the only space in Lyrian over which she had ever felt a real sense of ownership. She sighed. The plan had never been to stay here. Her belongings were packed. "I'm ready."

\* \* \*

Rachel and Corinne caught up to the others on the main floor of the temple. A variety of treefolk mingled with Rachel's companions. Certius had engendered the treefolk, humanlike races covered with foliage, most with moss or ivy, some with vines or thorns. Treefolk guides would be escorting both of the departing groups out of the jungle.

Galloran, his blindfold in place as usual, stood conversing with Nollin, Kerick, and Halco. The amars belonging to Kerick and Halco had been planted in a fertile patch of soil shortly after their arrival to Mianamon, and they had been reborn barely ten weeks later. The three seedmen would be accompanying Galloran's group—Halco meant to split off and rejoin his people, while Kerick and Nollin would proceed to Trensicourt. Kerick and Halco appeared to be in good spirits as they chatted with Galloran, while Nollin seemed to brood.

Of all the members of the delegation who had set out from the Seven Vales, Nollin had liked the prophecy least. Although he had kept in contact with influential seedfolk, sending many messages by eagle proclaiming his doubts and misgivings, to his credit the dour seedman had confirmed that the oracle had indeed foreseen at least a small chance at victory if Galloran and his remaining allies took the offensive. Since the prediction contradicted Nollin's personal expectations and politics, his affirmation lent needed credibility to the report.

Galloran had shaved his beard and trimmed his hair short. His face looked younger than the gray hair and whiskers had hinted—middle-aged, with chiseled features and a strong chin.

Jason waved at Rachel, and she trotted toward him. He looked good in his clean traveling robes. On the floor beside him sat a pair of covered buckets.

"What's in there?" Rachel asked.

"Galloran is sending us with most of the extra orantium," Jason explained. "Twelve globes. He's only taking three, since the Amar Kabal have hundreds in reserve for the assault on Felrook. They promised to resupply him early by sending fifty to Trensicourt."

"You're carrying the spheres in buckets?"

"Check it out," Jason said, prying off one of the lids. Inside, six crystal orantium globes floated in clear gel.

"What's with the goo?"

"I was just asking the same thing," Jason said. "The wizard Certius invented it specifically for transporting orantium globes. I guess they still have a decent stash here."

"I thought that hardly any orantium had survived except for what we found in the swamp."

"Right. But Mianamon is old. They have more left here than any other place besides the Sunken Lands. Like, twenty globes."

Rachel dipped a finger in the goo. It came out coated in glossy syrup. "So the goo keeps the globes from smacking together and cracking?"

"Partly. Also, if a sphere breaks, supposedly the mineral won't explode."

Rachel rubbed her thumb against her slick finger. "I get it. Orantium combusts when exposed to air or water. But not this stuff."

"It lets us transport orantium with less fear of blowing ourselves apart."

Rachel wiped her hand on her robe. "I wonder if they used something like this to mine orantium in the first place."

“Maybe,” Jason said. “The people who would know are long gone, along with the mine.”

“You could always check at the Celestine Library,” Rachel suggested.

“That’s totally what we’ll do there. Ancient mining research. Either that or we’ll find the location of Darian the Seer and save the world.”

Galloran raised his hoarse voice. “I believe we’re all assembled.” All other conversation stopped as everyone turned to hear him speak. Many acolytes and treefolk had gathered to see them off. “I would like to thank the inhabitants of Mianamon for their generous hospitality over the past months. You have proven yourselves friends and allies in times of hardship.”

The compliment earned scattered applause.

Galloran went on. “We now embark on missions prescribed by your most recent oracle. I thank the treefolk for providing us with safe passage through the jungle. Troubled times await us all. I will remain in communication via eagle whenever possible.

“The future of Lyrian has never been more precarious. Remain vigilant. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. I salute Jason and my friends, who now embark on a hazardous quest to a secret destination. Together they form one of the finest teams ever assembled in the history of Lyrian. If they counsel wisely and work as one, I expect there is little they cannot accomplish.”

Nollin started laughing derisively.

“Is something humorous?” Farfalee asked.

“I’m simply amused by this brave talk of victory,” Nollin said. “Can we be just a touch more realistic?”

“Enlighten us,” Galloran offered. Rachel could tell he wasn’t thrilled with the interruption.

“We’re not going to accomplish anything,” Nollin said simply. “I’ll do my best alongside you, but we’re chasing a phantom triumph. A fool’s mirage. The oracle made it clear that victory was all but impossible.”

“What would you have us do?” Drake challenged.

“I would tell the good people of Mianamon to expect word of our failure,” Nollin replied. “I would encourage them to withdraw deep into the heart of the jungle, to promote the breeding of ferocious beasts, and to erect whatever defenses they can contrive. After our nations fall, this will be the last vestige of free civilization on the continent. They should take every measure to protect it.”

“You can’t write us off like that,” Jason argued.

“Can’t I?” Nollin asked innocently. “The oracle did. She made it abundantly clear that this venture has virtually no chance of success. It will end in our ruin.”

“Then why are you participating?” Farfalee asked.

Nollin faced her. “If we’re already doomed, why not chase one last pleasant illusion? This was the decision of my people, and I will hold true to it. But the rest of Lyrian should brace for disaster.”

Rachel noticed the treefolk murmuring and shifting uncomfortably.

“If we think like that, we probably will fail,” Jason said resolutely. “The oracle told us that we still have a chance to beat Maldor. We need to focus on that.”

“You’re free to dream however you wish,” Nollin teased. “But don’t ask the rest of us to share your unrealistic—”

“Then don’t ask us to share your weakness!” Jason interrupted.

Nollin seemed taken aback.

Jason plowed forward. “This isn’t really my fight. It’s not my world. I’m not helping because my people obligated me. I’m helping because Lyrian needs to be saved. It’s a good place with good people. There’s so much potential that will be lost if Maldor wins! I’ve met him. He wants to control all of Lyrian. He wants to rule it completely, for as long as he can, and since he could live hundreds of years, that could add up to a really long time. If he wins, Lyrian will become a terrible place. He barely even tries to hide that. Stopping him is the right thing to do.”

“Nobody is arguing that we should embrace Maldor,” Nollin said soothingly.

“You’re arguing that stopping him is unrealistic,” Jason said. “But don’t you get what Galloran was saying? You’re with people who do unrealistic things. He’s killed three torivors! I spoke the Word to Maldor and then escaped Felrook. Rachel killed Orruck and we took his orantium. We all made it through Ebera. We’ve done lots of unrealistic things. Why not try for a few more?”

The assemblage cheered. Rachel wanted to hug Jason. The mood in the room had gone from gloomy to jubilant in a matter of moments. Nollin surveyed the surrounding reactions with a condescending smile. He shook his head a little and raised his hands in surrender. The gesture reluctantly gave permission for the others to enjoy their delusion. They took him up on the offer.

“Well said, Lord Jason,” Galloran approved, motioning for the crowd to quiet down. “This is not an hour for doubt or fear.” The blindfolded king drew his

sword. The sleek blade flashed like a mirror. “I have in my custody four swords of torivorian make, won by besting lurkers in battle. I have owned two others, but they were lost when I was taken by Maldor. I will keep one of the four swords. My daughter Corinne will retain another. A third will travel into peril with Lord Jason of Caberton.”

“Me?” Jason blurted.

Rachel glanced at his shocked expression.

“I wish I could give more,” Galloran apologized.

“But I’m not the best swordsman in my group,” Jason protested. “Far from it. How about Jasher? Or Drake?”

“According to the oracle, you must survive to reach Darian the Pyromancer,” Galloran said. “You must live to receive the vital information. Therefore you should be the best equipped of your party.”

Jasher nudged Jason. “Go accept it,” the seedman whispered.

Rachel nodded her agreement.

“Okay,” Jason said, walking to Galloran. “Thank you—I can’t believe it. I’ll do my best.”

Jason strapped the sword about his waist. Despite his height, he looked young.

Tark began the cheering. Others noisily joined him, and the approval quickly swelled to a wholehearted level that surprised Rachel. She found herself caught up in spirit of the moment, whistling and clapping.

Jason smiled bashfully. The cheers subsided. Jason stepped away from Galloran, who produced another torivorian sword. “The fourth sword will travel with me to Trensicourt, borne by Ferrin, son of Baldor.”

Mutters rippled through the crowd, not all of them approving. Rachel glanced at the displacer, his expression a study in surprise and disbelief. He walked over to Galloran and knelt before him. “This is too kingly a gift.”

“The blade comes with a price,” Galloran said. “You must wield it in defense of our cause. If you do so, you will more than earn it.”

Ferrin bowed his head. “I’m deeply honored, Your Majesty.”

“More honor awaits if you see this through,” Galloran rasped softly.

Lo handed Ferrin the sword. The displacer belted it on.

Considering Ferrin, Rachel decided that Galloran was wise to entrust him with the torivorian weapon. She knew Ferrin viewed the fine swords with an almost religious awe. Any gesture that might help cement his loyalty would give them a better chance for success.



Galloran raised his voice again. "Nedwin left weeks ago to prepare the way for us at Trensicourt. Nia did likewise for Jason and his party. The day wanes. The hour for farewells is almost past. Let us make ready to depart. Know that with every remaining moment of my life, with every opportunity I can seize and every resource I can borrow, I will devote myself to bringing down the emperor!"

This earned a final rousing cheer from the assemblage. Rachel found herself clapping and yelling along with the others. At the same time, she felt a little distant. Soon this moment would be a memory, as would the protective walls of Mianamon. Before long she would be separated from her two best friends in Lyrian, perhaps never to see them again. No more cheering. No more rest. No more jokes. Just a parade of unpredictable difficulties and dangers.

Corinne took her hand. Rachel looked up at her. *Are you in my mind?*

*We'll see each other again.*

*Do you really think so?*

*At times like this, it's the only thing we can let ourselves believe.*

A cynical part of Rachel wondered how much Corinne could possibly understand about times like this.

*When I stood outside that tree in the swamp, Corinne conveyed gently, all I clung to for years was a hope that my father would return for me. Long after I might have stopped believing, he finally came. And here I am.*

Rachel hugged her. *Be safe. Watch out for Jason.*

*I'll protect him with my life.*

Rachel looked up, startled by how earnestly Corinne had conveyed the sentiment.

*I'll do my best to stay alive too,* Corinne assured her.

"Bye, Corinne."

"Safe travels."

Everyone was checking gear and shouldering packs. They were really leaving! Rachel hurried over to Jasher and hugged him. "Be safe."

"You too."

She turned to the half giant, Aram, who would remain small and unremarkable until sundown swelled him into a tall, heavily muscled warrior. "Take care of yourself."

"Don't fret about me," Aram said. "I'll do my best to watch out for the others."

Drake was walking away, following a treeperson draped in heavy vines. Rachel jogged to him and placed a hand on his elbow. The seedman stopped, turning somewhat, not fully facing her. The profile view of his face emphasized his flat features. "I suppose there was no escaping you."

"What? You wanted to just wander off without a word?"

"It can be easier that way."

"Don't be silly. You come back. You survive. I want to see you after this. I want you to show me your private valley in the mountains."

"It wouldn't be private anymore." A small grin bent his lips as he rubbed the back of his neck, the place where his amar had failed to grow correctly after his last rebirth. "But I suppose I could live with that. Stay close to Galloran. He'll keep you from harm."

Rachel threw her arms around him. They had not been parted since Drake had guided her away from the torivor for weeks in the wilderness. "Take care."

"I'll try. Have a safe journey, Rachel."

"I'll miss you."

He gave a stiff nod and strode away. She thought he might be near the brink of showing emotion. Her heart squeezed painfully at the thought of parting from him and so many of her other friends. She tried to draw strength from his example.

Rachel caught up to Jason, who already had a pack on his back and a bucket of orantium in one hand. He set down the bucket and hugged her. He felt solid. Consecutive months of good eating and intense physical training had paid off.

"Are you trying to speak with your mind?" he said after a moment. "I can't do that."

She pulled away from the embrace and looked into his eyes. "Don't give up."

"There goes my plan."

"I'm serious. Even if things look bad, find a way. You're good at that. The oracle saw a way that we could win. Find it."

"You too," Jason urged. "Within reason. Don't try some huge Edomic command and blow yourself to pieces."

"There goes my plan."

"You stole my line." Jason glanced at the others departing.

"I know we have to hurry," Rachel said. "But this is it. We're taking different paths." She took a breath and put conviction into her words. "We'll see each other again."

Tark came up to them. "This is wrong, Lord Jason, letting them part us."

Jason turned to the stocky musician. "Sorry, Tark. The oracle is calling the shots on this one."

"I remain your pledged man," Tark avowed, touching a fist to his chest. "What are your orders?"

"Do your best to help Galloran win his war."

"I swear it."

"And keep an eye on Rachel. See if you can get her to stop telling me she's going to see me again. I think she's jinxing us."

Rachel punched Jason's arm.

Tark eyed Rachel uncertainly. She saw a hint of disapproval in his gaze, along with a little wariness.

Jason smiled. "That's assault. Tark, take her out."

The musician grinned, but not with his eyes. "You better handle this one."

Chuckling, Jason picked up the bucket of explosives.

Rachel felt the moment slipping away. There was so much she wanted to say. What if something happened to him? What if she never told him how much she appreciated his coming back to Lyrian for her? How much she cared about him? There were too many feelings to translate into words. "See you later," she managed.

"Not if I see you first," Jason said, starting toward the main doors of the temple.

She watched him walking away. Were those the last words he would say to her? She stalked after him. "You can't leave with a joke."

He glanced back. "Why not?"

"What if I die?"

"Then at least I cheered you up before the end."

"That wasn't a cheerful joke. It was a teasing joke. And not even a very good one."

"Fine. Why did the baby cross the road?"

"No jokes," Rachel complained, striding along beside him.

"I guess it's more fitting that we should end with an argument."

"I just mean there are certain times when jokes aren't appropriate."

"Which makes them more needed and funny."

She grabbed his arm and tugged him to a halt. "You have your way of coping, and I have mine. You're amazing. You're inspiring. You're so brave. I'll miss you and I appreciate you. Everything about you."

"Even my humor?"

“Almost everything. Don’t die.”

“It might help if you stop giving my eulogy. You don’t die either. I’ll miss you too. I have one last question.”

“What?”

“Are you going to bring your pack?”

Rachel started. She had left it back where she had been talking with Corinne.

“Never mind,” Jason said, looking over his shoulder. “Your acolyte worshippers are grabbing it for you. Do you have a pen? You should really sign some autographs for them.”

Rachel banged her forehead with the heel of her hand. “You know what I still have? My camera! I’ve been meaning all winter to get a group shot.”

She rushed over to the acolytes, retrieved the camera from her pack, and hurried back to Jason, who stood waiting.

“You really are an optimist,” Jason said. “You realize you’ll have to get back home before you can develop any photos?”

“At least I can do it myself,” Rachel said. “I’ve done it lots. If this camera were digital, I’d probably be out of batteries by now.”

Jason helped her round everyone up for a group shot on the temple steps. Rachel showed Ulani how to work the camera. Jason explained that the device would capture and preserve the image, along with their souls. Rachel explained that he was joking. Once Ulani had taken a couple of shots, Rachel let Tark have a turn as photographer with Ulani in the picture. Then Rachel snapped an extra one herself for good measure.

After stowing her camera, Rachel gave Jason a final hug good-bye. And then they left by separate trails into the muggy jungle.

# THE JOURNEY NORTH

Even with the expert guidance of the treefolk, Jason found jungle travel exhausting. In the gloom beneath the dense canopy the humid air stayed oppressively hot and still. Hidden by the ferny undergrowth, roots and creepers crisscrossed the uneven ground, ready to catch a toe or turn an ankle. At times the group would take to the trees, moving along massive limbs or traversing camouflaged bridges fashioned from vines.

The way proved challenging at its gentlest—without the guides the pathless journey would have been hopeless. The treefolk navigated around endless thickets of impenetrable vegetation without ever needing to pause or double back. They avoided numerous carnivorous plants: huge, quivering mouths on nimble stalks; squidlike, thorny tendrils that attacked from above; bulging bulbs poised to emit poisonous spores; and sticky mats ready to enfold the unwary. Dangerous snakes, centipedes, and spiders were identified and eluded. Twice, the treefolk waited silently with the group, high in a tree, while a jungle cat the size of a horse prowled down below, great bunches of muscle churning beneath a glossy pelt.

At times the abundant plant and animal life distracted Jason from the taxing terrain. With the mild winter waning, blossoms flourished throughout the jungle, from elaborate trombone-shaped flowers to glorious blooms on corkscrew vines to delicate orchids of infinite color and variety. Exotic birds with vibrant plumage and monkeys of all description populated the trees. After they happened across a large family of obese, blue-gray apes, the others had to drag Jason away. He would have contentedly watched the shaggy brutes toddle about on their stumpy legs for the rest of the afternoon.

The treefolk foraged most of the food for the group. Diverse fruit, rich nectar, savory mushrooms, peculiar nuts, and crunchy grubs made up the majority of their meals. Jason enjoyed the unusual diet and seldom craved hot food in spite of its absence.

One steamy morning Bahootsa, the thorn-encased leader of the eight treefolk escorts, announced that they were approaching the northern perimeter of the jungle, where imperial soldiers had been known to venture. When he suggested a break for the day to allow five of the treefolk to scout ahead, nobody complained.

They stopped beside a swift brook with banks of dense red clay. Trees and shrubs didn't crowd the stream, which created a clearing of sorts—a rare sight in the heavily vegetated region.

Wandering along the brook away from the group, Jason drew the torivorian sword Galloran had given him. The elegant weapon felt lighter than it looked. He held the blade horizontally in front of his face, staring at the clear reflection of his eyes in the burnished metal, and saw Corinne approaching from behind. Jason turned.

“Isn't it beautiful?” Corinne asked.

Jason thought *she* was easily the most beautiful thing in sight. The realization made him embarrassed, so he looked around, trying to appreciate what she meant. Tall palm trees with broad fronds screened the morning sun. Bright birds flapped and perched overhead. The aroma of tropical blossoms filled his nostrils. “It's like paradise.”

Corinne smiled. “I meant the sword.” Her hand rested on the hilt of her matching blade.

“Right.” Jason swished it through the air, trying to look heroic. “It feels so light.”

“Mine too,” Corinne said. “But don't worry. The sword will feel plenty heavy to your enemies. Father explained that the blades contain more mass than the wielder feels.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Jason said, holding the sword vertically. “At the Last Inn, Galloran slashed through helmets and armor like they were made of paper.”

“You should practice with the sword,” Corinne urged. “Get used to how it differs from other weapons. The shock of impact feels dampened. The blade swings light but strikes heavy.” She drew her sword and stabbed it through the trunk of a palm tree with an easy thrust. The tree was nearly a foot thick, but the sword penetrated the wood effortlessly, the polished blade protruding from the far side. Corinne withdrew the sword.

Jason swung his sword back and forth a few times, then approached the same trunk Corinne had stabbed and hacked at it with the edge. He swung hard and

expected the blade to bite deep, but he was surprised when the sword passed clean through the tree without too much resistance. Jason skipped aside as the palm tree toppled in his direction.

“Careful,” Corinne laughed after the tree had crashed down parallel to the brook.

“That’s what I call sharp,” Jason said, inspecting the blade with new respect. Passing through the trunk had left no stain on the reflective surface. “We should become lumberjacks.”

“Maybe someday,” Corinne said wistfully. “I’d rather chop trees than people.”

“Don’t get all serious on me,” Jason complained. “You’re as bad as Rachel.”

“You miss her.”

Jason shrugged, looking away. “It was nice having her around. I worry about her. I try to remind myself that she’s in good company. I bet you miss the mental chats. With Galloran and Rachel gone, you’re the only telepathic person around.”

“I’m not sure I appreciated how much I relied on speaking in silence until the option was taken from me. I’ve tried several times to reach out to them over the great distance, but with no hint of success.”

“You guys never could make it work over more than a mile or so.”

“And only that far with considerable effort.”

“Well, it’ll be good exercise for your lips.”

“It’ll be good exercise for your lips,” Jason’s voice repeated from behind him. Jason whirled, sword ready, baffled by the perfect echo. He glanced over at Corinne. “Did you hear that?”

“Did you hear that?” replied a voice not far off in the jungle. Once again the speaker managed a perfect impersonation of Jason. Taking a few steps in the direction of the impostor, Jason found himself staring at a creamy parrot with a frill of orange feathers around its head.

Corinne stepped toward Jason, sword in hand. “It sounded just like you.”

“It sounded just like you,” the bird repeated in Corinne’s voice. It flitted from the branch it occupied to a perch farther from the brook. “Did you hear that?” the parrot asked in Corinne’s voice. “It sounded just like you,” the bird replied as Jason.

“No way,” Jason said, pushing past ferns to get a closer look at the parrot.

“No way,” the bird responded in Corinne’s voice.

Something came charging recklessly through the shrubs from off to one side. Jason pivoted to see Bahootsa racing toward him, a knife in one hand, the other

thorny arm flailing, waving Jason back toward the brook.

Jason looked from Bahootsa to the bird. Could it be dangerous? As he backed away uncertainly, the parrot took flight, and the shadows behind it came to life as a gargantuan jungle cat sprang out of the gloom. Bahootsa intercepted the monstrous feline mid-leap, tackling it sideways, altering the trajectory of the jump enough that the outstretched claws whooshed through the air beside Jason, narrowly missing their target.

The jungle cat shook off Bahootsa. Numerous gaping wounds opened as unforgiving thorns shredded its glossy hide. Bristling and falling back, the huge cat roared, a ferocious sound that sent dozens of the surrounding birds skyward. Jason stared numbly at its long white fangs, yellowed at the base, and held his sword ready. No lion or tiger was ever half the weight of this huge alpha predator.

Bahootsa was back on his feet, shuffling to position himself between Jason and the great cat, crimson blood dripping from his thorns. Sword held defensively, Jason backed out of the vegetation to the bare red clay of the stream's bank. He sensed Corinne behind him and stopped retreating. No way would he let the jungle cat get to her. The thought made him braver. If his sword could cut through a tree, it could tear through an oversized cat skull. He would need to time it right.

As the jungle cat crouched low, wads of muscle bunching in the shoulders, one of its green eyes vanished, a feathered shaft suddenly protruding. Yowling fiercely, the great cat whirled and darted away into the trees.

Swiveling, Jason saw that Farfalee had already set a second arrow to her bowstring and drawn the feathers to her cheek. She stood no less than thirty yards away. How she had threaded an arrow through all that foliage and into the eye of the cat was mind-blowing. She remained ready to release the second arrow as Bahootsa joined Jason and Corinne.

"We call the mimicking bird a sonalid," Bahootsa said, the words coming out heavily accented. "They often hunt in tandem with a dagamond. The sonalid lures the prey into danger. While the cat eats, the sonalid picks parasites from its pelt."

Heart thudding, Jason nodded woodenly. The shock had barely begun to fade. "Are you okay?"

Bahootsa grinned. "My thorns are harder than stone. I am not easy prey. Worse predators than dagamonds prowl the depths of the jungle."



Jason had never fully appreciated how well the serpentine briars and abundant black thorns of the prickly treefolk functioned as armor. Bahootsa was walking around in his own portable shark cage.

"You saved my life," Jason said as Farfalee, Jasher, and Drake approached.

"I pledged to see you safely to our borders," Bahootsa replied. He gestured at the others. "We save your lives many times each day. This time was just a close call. It was a wily old dagamond. I did not sense it stalking us." He faced Farfalee. "An expert shot."

"I try to be useful," she replied, the arrow no longer on her string but still in her hand. Her eyes studied the jungle.

"It is gone," Bahootsa said. "The dagamond got more than it bargained for. Plenty more. It prefers to surprise its victim, make an easy kill. It isn't accustomed to a challenge. It has little experience with pain."

"Are you all right?" Corinne asked, placing a hand on Jason's arm.

"I'm fine," Jason replied. "My heart rate might be a little high. For a second there I thought I was panther chow." He sheathed his sword.

"Predators love stragglers," Bahootsa said. "We should remain together."

\* \* \*

Over the next several days the jungle began to feel more sparse, the air less humid, and the nights chillier. Animal sightings became less frequent, and the need for the treefolk guides diminished.

Atop a low bluff, with grassland stretching out before them, Jason and his companions bid farewell to Bahootsa and the treefolk. The sun went down, and Aram expanded from puny to formidable. After their guides melted away into the twilight, the others sat in a loose circle. Jason appreciated the chance to rest. Without the treefolk the group felt small.

"We'll miss those guides," Drake commented, biting into a succulent piece of fruit. "Having them around almost made this a holiday."

"The jungle is their domain," Jasher replied. "They're uncomfortable abroad. And with stealth our greatest need, their presence would prove a liability. Every pair of eyes would linger on them."

"More treefolk should roam the kingdoms," Drake grouched. "At least in the south. If they left their jungle from time to time, they might not stand out so much in a crowd."

Jason gazed ahead at the grassy expanse they would have to cross. Maldor would be hunting for them, and he saw no place to hide. At least with the

treefolk along they could have fought off greater numbers.

“Nia was going to provide horses?” Aram asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Ideally, yes,” Farfalee replied. She sat near Jasher, petting the eagle that perched on her forearm. “Her first priority is to recruit enough drinlings to man a ship. After that, if possible, she will endeavor to send horses and an escort to the woods north of a hamlet called Hilloby.”

“Let’s hope she succeeds,” Drake said. “It’s a considerable walk to the Inland Sea.”

“How far to Hilloby?” Corinne wondered.

Jasher squinted at the sky, then scanned the horizon. “Maybe three days on foot.”

“Not much cover out there,” Jason observed.

“We’ll travel at night,” Jasher said. “Hide during the day.”

“The comforts of life as a fugitive,” Drake sighed. “Stumbling about in the dark without mounts.”

“It beats capture and torture,” Farfalee said shortly.

“Granted,” Drake agreed. “No need to take offense.”

“No need to emphasize obvious discomforts,” she replied. The eagle spread its wings and gave a shriek.

“You’re upsetting the bird,” Drake accused.

“I’m upsetting . . . ,” Farfalee repeated in a huff. She compressed her lips, clearly making an effort to restrain her temper.

“They can sense bossiness,” Drake warned matter-of-factly.

Jason worked to keep his expression composed. He didn’t look toward Corinne, who also seemed to be resisting her amusement.

Jasher leaned close to Farfalee. “Don’t let him get to you,” he said gently, touching her elbow.

Farfalee shrugged away from her husband’s touch. With a measured motion of her arm she sent the eagle into the sky. Many stars were now visible. The eagle soared away.

“I can’t believe it can find its way back to you,” Jason said, eyes skyward, hoping to change the subject.

“Eldrin was no amateur,” Farfalee said, her tone kinder. “He engineered this breed of eagles to be ideal messengers. Once they bond with a person, the eagles can find them no matter how separated they become.”

“The three we have are also bonded to Galloran?” Jason asked.

“And Tark, and Io, to be safe,” Farfalee said. “Once we learn what Darian has to tell us, I have but to command, and the eagles will carry the message to our friends.”

“And until you send a message, they keep returning to you,” Jason said.

“Correct. I have worked with messenger eagles for centuries. I spent many days at Mianamon’s aviary selecting the most reliable birds and prepping them. Until we need them, they should remain self-sufficient—hunt their own food, find their own shelter. They’ll return to me every couple of days.”

“An expert tracker might follow them to us,” Aram cautioned.

“Possibly,” Farfalee conceded. “But that’s a chance we have to take.”

“Jason has Ferrin’s ear,” Drake reminded everyone.

Farfalee glared at her brother. “Which is a welcome redundancy, even if the displacer might only be interested in spying on us.”

“He might be able to hear you,” Drake muttered.

“I hope he does,” Farfalee said. “I won’t trust that scoundrel until this is over and he’s done his part. And I don’t mind him hearing it.”

“He won’t hear much,” Jason said. “I keep the ear heavily bundled, deep in my bag.”

“Probably for the best,” Farfalee said.

Somewhere overhead, an eagle let out a piercing cry. Jason tilted his head back but couldn’t spot the bird in the darkening sky. He didn’t like the idea of enemies tracking them using the messenger eagles. Unfortunately, Farfalee was right—they couldn’t afford to place all their trust in Ferrin.

Drake stretched, fists extended, back arched. “What if some accident should befall you, dear sister? Would the eagles come to your seed? Are they bonded to any of the rest of us?”

“They’re also bonded to Jasher,” she replied. “They would also come to Corinne.”

“Jasher?” Drake challenged. “Jasher dies all the time! He has too many lives to spare. Why not Jason?”

“I’m allergic to eagles,” Jason joked, trying to keep out of it.

“Then why not Aram? He strikes me as a survivor.”

Aram grunted. “The survivor suggests that if we need darkness to travel, we take advantage while we have it.”

Drake extended a hand toward the half giant. “See? Forget bonding the bird to him. Why isn’t he the leader?”

“I’ve sampled that role,” Aram chuckled. “Too much responsibility. Too much accountability.”

Drake shook his head. “Mark my words, he’ll outlive us all.”

“Aram certainly has a point,” Jasher said. “We should get underway.”

“Are you the leader?” Drake asked with mock curiosity, eyes on Jasher, then glancing at Farfalee.

Jason noticed Corinne shift uncomfortably. She didn’t like conflict, and when Drake got in a mood to bother his sister, there was always plenty. At least Farfalee looked like she was trying to remain patient.

“Jasher is in charge of tactics,” Farfalee sighed. “Aram is the muscle. Jason has the ear. Corinne has her sword. You’re the pest. And I’m the leader.”

“I can live with that,” Drake said. “Leaders draw a lot of attention. The pest sometimes survives.”

“We’re all going to survive,” Farfalee affirmed.

“Not according to the oracle,” Drake reminded her.

“Maybe the casualties will be with the other group,” Aram speculated.

“That’s the spirit!” Drake praised, clapping the big warrior on the back. “Friends, if we watch Aram, we might have a chance. Dodge when he dodges. Duck when he ducks.”

“I feel a headache coming on,” Farfalee deadpanned. “Drake, why don’t you scout ahead?”

Drake glanced at Aram. “What do you say? Will I survive the assignment?”

“I give you better odds than if you keep needling your sister.”

“Good enough for me,” Drake declared, rising. “Try to keep up.”

\* \* \*

The next three nights were spent covering as much ground as possible, with the secondary mission of finding concealment before sunrise. Aram toted his heavy sword and armor as well as the two buckets of orantium. The first day they hid in the middle of some bushes. The second day was spent in a shallow ravine. During the third day they huddled against a steep hillside.

Not long after sunset on the fourth night, Jason and his companions came within sight of Hilloby. There were no more than twenty buildings in the humble hamlet, and not all of them had lit windows. Scattered farmhouses added somewhat to the community. The modest village represented the first evidence of other people Jason had seen since leaving the jungle.

“Who checks the woods north of town?” Drake asked.

“We could all go,” Jason said.

Farfalee shook her head. “We expect to find drinlings with horses, but the drinlings could have been followed. Anything could await us in those woods. We should send a pair to scout.”

“I’ll go,” Jasher said. “And Drake.”

Farfalee gave a nod, and the two seedmen departed.

Jason found a seat beside Corinne on a flat boulder. The night was cool but not cold. Half a moon hung in the sky. He had grown used to sleeping during the day, so he felt wide awake.

He still couldn’t converse with Corinne privately without feeling a flutter of nervous excitement. It wasn’t just because she was ridiculously pretty. She was also grounded and smart and sweet and . . . ridiculously pretty.

“How are you holding up?” Jason asked.

It took her a moment to respond. She shivered and rubbed her elbow. “Honestly? I’m kind of worried. I’ve had this persistent feeling of dread lately. Like something bad is coming.”

“Tonight?”

Her brow furrowed as she looked up at the moon. “I’m not sure. I hope not.”

“Might just be the prophecy,” Aram said, joining the conversation unexpectedly. “I’ve felt unsettled ever since it was spoken. Nobody wants to hear that the odds are stacked heavily against them. It’s one thing to suspect it. Another thing to know it.”

“That’s probably it,” Corinne said, looking up and back at Aram.

“We should be fine for a while,” Jason said. “Nobody has seen us. Even among the others at Mianamon, nobody knows where we’re going.”

“Maldor must have been furious when we fled into the jungle,” Farfalee said, approaching and placing a foot on the edge of the boulder beside Jason. “It is one of the few places where he holds little influence. He’ll be watching for us to emerge all along the border.”

“He knows we were with Galloran,” Aram said. “He’ll pay special heed to the roads leading to Trensicourt.”

“Perhaps,” Farfalee conceded. “Jason is correct that stealth remains our best asset for the present. I’m going to take a look around.” Farfalee strolled away into the shadows.

“The eagles,” Aram muttered once she was out of earshot. “I could do without the eagles. If a tracker knew his trade, those eagles could lead him straight to us. Otherwise I can’t imagine how the emperor—”

“Lurkers,” Jason interrupted. “He’s used them before.” Jason fingered the strand of beads and bone around his neck. “I still have the necklace Rachel brought me from the charm woman. But since Drake gave his to Galloran, the rest of our minds are open to them.”

“I’d sense a lurker,” Corinne said. “I could hear the one that attacked Father. If one reached for us mentally, I’d know.”

“Best not to discuss such things,” Aram said with an air of superstition. “The less our thoughts turn their way the better.”

Jason decided not to add that the best way to get him to focus on something was to tell him not to think about it.

The moon slowly moved across the sky. Corinne leaned back and closed her eyes. Jason tried not to stare at her. Weird that she could totally take him in a swordfight. He had seen her practicing with her father, and she was out of his league.

Jason folded his arms. He glanced at Aram, who had settled on the ground, his broad back to the boulder. Hypothetically, would he have a chance against Aram in a duel? No way. The half giant had such a long reach and swung so hard. What about Jasher? Or Drake? Not if they were really trying. He could spar with them, but if it came down to it, life or death, they would certainly beat him. What if he was using his torivorian sword? No, not unless it shattered Jasher’s blade, and then the seedman tripped or something. Farfalee had never taken a big interest in hand-to-hand combat. Jason thought he might have a chance against her if she didn’t put an arrow through him from a mile away.

Corinne breathed softly, her elegant features bathed in moonlight. Jason shifted around, trying to get more comfortable on the boulder. He was definitely a better fighter than he used to be, but if every member of his team could defeat him in combat, didn’t that make him the weakest link? When things got bad, what was he supposed to contribute?

He understood how Rachel would help. As her Edomic abilities increased, her value grew exponentially. He remembered her sending that flaming table across the main room at the Last Inn. That was some serious power. He could picture her making a difference on her mission. He just didn’t understand why the oracle had paid so much attention to him.

Maybe he was stressing too much. Maybe he just needed to relax. Hopefully, if he stayed ready and tried his best, he would manage to make himself useful when the time came. Why did he feel like he was totally kidding himself?

Aram began to snore. Farfalee, obviously restless, came and went a few times. And then the sound of approaching hoofbeats brought Jason, Corinne, and Aram to their feet.

“That has to be good, right?” Jason said. “Horses?”

“I don’t sense anything bad,” Corinne said, wiping her eyes.

“They’re coming right at us,” Aram whispered. “Jasher or Drake would never have given us up. Let’s take cover just in case.” He drew his enormous sword, from pommel to tip about as long as Jason was tall, the blade heavy and sharp. Aram held it casually in one hand. Most grown men would struggle to heft it with two.

The threesome ducked into the cover of some bushes. Farfalee joined them after a moment, an arrow nocked and ready. Aram pried the lid off one of the buckets of orantium.

Eight horses with six riders trotted into view. Four of the riders were drinlings. “All clear,” Jasher called from astride his mount.

Jason and the others emerged from hiding.

“We made four new friends,” Drake said. “They’re well provisioned.”

“I only count two spare mounts,” Farfalee observed.

“Two of us will now make our way afoot,” said one of the newcomers, his words accented.

“We’d hate to strand you,” Aram said.

The drinling speaker smirked. “If we raced to Durna, the two of us on foot might beat you. Horses need rest. We don’t. A drinling can cover a lot of ground running at a full sprint day and night. All he needs is food.”

“Helps when he can eat dirt,” Jason said. “Or grass, or squirrels, or pinecones.”

“Sounds as though you know our ways,” the drinling said.

“Nia never fails to amaze me with what she can eat,” Jason said.

“She may amaze you again with the team she assembled,” the drinling replied. “Good people. We drinlings will get you on the water. We’ll defend you as best we can. The rest is up to you.”

Jason glanced at Corinne. She looked relieved. Hard times might be coming. But maybe not tonight.

## A PRIVATE MEETING

A cold rain sheeted down relentlessly, pattering against the roof of the old storage shed and making the puddles outside appear to boil. Seated on a wooden cask, Rachel drew her cloak closer about herself to help against the chill. Across the yard three lanterns hanging under the eaves of the stable brightened the rainy night.

Beside her sat Galloran, blindfold in place, his sheathed sword resting across his knees. At her other hand crouched Bartley of Wershon. Yesterday the husky viscount had been full of blustering bravado. Today he was much more subdued, rubbing his lips regularly as he stared soberly outside.

Rachel noticed her fingers trembling. Was it the cold or her nerves? She tightened her hands into fists. Weeks of travel and anticipation had led to this night. Much time and effort could be saved if the meeting went well.

"They're late," Bartley whispered.

Rachel had only seen the viscount briefly on the day when Jason had faced Chancellor Copernum in a battle of wits. But she knew that he had helped Jason. And according to Brin and Nicholas, he had quietly proven very useful ever since Jason had departed Trensicourt months ago. At present he had really stuck his neck out, offering his estate as the location of the upcoming meeting.

"Tardiness is probably a good sign," Galloran said. "If this were an ambush, they would have taken care to be prompt."

"Instead they elect to insult us?" Bartley asked softly.

"The weather is harsh tonight," Galloran replied calmly.

Tark suddenly ducked into the storeroom, water streaming from his cloak. "I saw the signal. Three quick flashes, evenly spaced."

"Then our guests approach as requested," Galloran replied. "No evidence of foul play."

"Aye," Tark confirmed, and slipped away into the darkness.

Rachel knew that Nedwin, Ferrin, Brin, and Nollin were scouting the area. Tark and Io were stationed in a neighboring outbuilding with horses ready for a



getaway. They had worked hard to defend against a potential ambush. The visitors thought the meeting was taking place up the slope at the manor. At the last moment one of Bartley's sentries would divert them to the lower stable, where Kerick awaited to greet them.

After riding hard from the jungle's edge to the outer boundaries of Trensicourt, Rachel had spent two days living in a remote barn while Nedwin arranged the particulars for this meeting. Yesterday morning, before sunrise, she and her friends had arrived at the Wershon estate to temporarily take up residence in a large mill at one corner of the property. If this meeting went well, she might sleep in comfort before much longer.

"You're sure you want me at the meeting?" Rachel asked.

"Certain," Galloran replied. "These are men accustomed to solving problems through negotiation, but they will not be eager to surrender the kingdom. We must appear strong. A talented Edomic adept is a unique and intimidating weapon. Remember, if the opportunity arises, show your power by exerting control over them. Petrify them, put them on the ground—anything to make them feel vulnerable. The talent to command men is extremely rare and bespeaks a deep reservoir of power."

"All right," Rachel said, trying to sound like somebody he could rely on. Did Galloran suspect how terrified it made her to think that the outcome of this meeting might depend on how intimidating she seemed? Was he hearing her insecurities as she thought them? Maybe his attention was elsewhere. Or maybe he was kind enough to pretend he couldn't sense her anxiety.

Rachel noticed Bartley warily eyeing her acolyte robe through the gap in her cloak. At least they seemed to have an effect on him. He turned his attention back out the door and softly cleared his throat. "A lone rider approaches."

"We invited three guests," Galloran said. "Have they only sent a messenger?"

Rachel watched the hooded rider pull up to the stable, dismount, and lead his steed below the overhanging eaves. Not far from one of the dangling lanterns, Kerick approached the man and engaged him in conversation. After words were exchanged, Kerick took the reins and gestured for the man to enter the stable. He then faced away from the storage shed where Rachel hid and waved his arm twice over his head.

"There's the signal," Bartley whispered. "I suppose this means at least one of them came."

"How could they resist?" Galloran asked. "Trensicourt is currently run by strategists and compromisers, not men of action. Strategists need information.

Compromisers require meetings. They had to send someone.”

“Strategists also like traps,” Bartley added. “These compromisers have an untrustworthy reputation.”

Galloran gave a nod. “We’ll remain on guard. Rachel, at the first sign of trouble, don’t be afraid to use force.”

Rachel told herself that she had trained for this. She had used Edomic in dicey situations before. But she had only commanded a person under pressure the night Kalia had attacked. Those commands had been urgent and reflexive. This would be a different sort of challenge: commanding a powerful enemy to prove a point. Would she be able to get it right?

Rachel raised the hood of her heavy cloak and took Galloran by the hand. She led him out into the downpour, with Bartley close behind and Io joining them. Rachel kept her eyes on the stable, but there was little to see. Kerick and the visitor had disappeared inside. Rain drummed against her hood. She tried to help Galloran avoid the worst puddles. By the time they reached the overhanging roof of the stable, their boots were caked with mud.

As Rachel led Galloran through the entryway, she got her first clear look at the visitor. An open area before the stalls had been swept, and a large table had been brought in. Food awaited, and drink. The smell of fresh rolls mingled with the inevitable odors of pent-up horses.

The visitor stood near the table. Tall and thin with stooped shoulders, he had a prominent, bony nose and wore a stern expression. A dagger hung from his belt, but no other weapon was apparent. He had hung his cloak on a peg and had replaced his hood with a large tricornered hat.

“Who has come?” Galloran whispered.

“Chancellor Copernum,” Bartley and Rachel murmured in unison.

Kerick had led Copernum’s large steed into a stall and was now rubbing it down. Copernum regarded the four newcomers in silence, his body still, his alert eyes in constant motion.

His gaze made Rachel uncomfortable. He was renowned for his clever mind. He had tried to have Jason killed.

“Welcome, Chancellor,” Galloran said, doing his best to sound upbeat with his raspy voice, ruined by the same caustic powder that had blinded him. “Thank you for accepting my invitation.”

“How could I ignore an opportunity to meet the renowned heir to Trensicourt?” Copernum replied dryly. “Bartley, good of you to host the evening, although the accommodations leave something to be desired.”

“Lay the blame on me,” Galloran insisted as Rachel led him to the table. “The viscount offered his home. Considering the purpose of our discussion, I opted for discretion over comfort.”

“An option to which you have undoubtedly grown accustomed,” Copernum replied.

Io took Galloran’s wet cloak. Galloran sat down, and Copernum mirrored him on the far side of the table. “I have endured some trying years,” Galloran agreed amiably, as if missing the condescension behind the remark.

“I’m afraid I don’t know your companions,” Copernum said.

Io collected Rachel’s cloak.

“This is Rachel, a Beyonder and a skilled Edomic adept,” Galloran said.

Copernum turned his shrewd eyes to her with sudden interest. “She wears the robe of the oracles.”

Galloran had suggested she wear the fine robe because it might make her appear more impressive. She hoped she wouldn’t come across as an imposter instead.

“Rachel has trained with multiple masters,” Galloran said. “The man hanging our cloaks is Io, future chief of the wild clan of drinlings. And you met Kerick, of the Amar Kabal, who is tending to your horse.”

“You travel with quite a menagerie,” Copernum said.

“You came alone,” Galloran replied.

Copernum nodded, picking up a dark roll and cracking it open. “The invitation did not allow for bodyguards. The Grand Duke of Edgemont sends his regards, as does the regent.” He took a bite.

“Was the weather too much for them?” Galloran asked.

“They have empowered me to speak on their behalf,” Copernum answered. “You have a reputation of impeccable honor, but years in Felrook have been known to alter a man. The duke and the regent did not feel it was prudent for the three of us to meet unguarded in a place of your choosing.”

“Regrettable, but I understand,” Galloran said.

Copernum poured himself a drink and took a sip. “Tell me: Why, after all these years, has the Blind King decided to come out of hiding?” The comment was clearly meant to imply that Copernum had known all along that Galloran was concealed in plain sight as the Blind King. Rachel supposed it was possible, since Maldor had known, and Copernum reportedly had strong connections with Felrook.

Galloran touched his blindfold. "I did not wish to emerge from exile until I felt whole and ready for the responsibilities ahead of me."

"Are you whole, then?" Copernum asked.

"As close as I can ever expect to be," Galloran replied. He half turned in his chair. "Rachel, Bartley, Io, please relax and be seated."

Rachel realized that she still stood near Galloran's chair, riveted into stillness by the tension underlying the conversation. She sat down to one side of Galloran; Bartley sat on the other. Io claimed the seat at the end of the table near Rachel.

Across the table Copernum set aside his roll. He leaned forward, narrow shoulders hunched, eyes intent. "What do you propose?"

"I am here to claim my birthright," Galloran said. "For years you and Dolan have managed Trensicourt in my absence. You have my gratitude for keeping Trensicourt independent. Now, for the good of the kingdom, I hope you will help make this a smooth transition."

Copernum folded his hands. "Do you believe that your ascension to the throne will benefit Trensicourt?"

"Who else could properly fill the role?" Galloran asked. "No other sons of Dromidus remain. I am the undisputed heir."

"If you are the rightful king, I don't see why you need my permission."

"Don't play the fool with me, Copernum," Galloran said. "We never knew each other well. As I recall, the former Marquess of Jansington was a distant cousin of yours. Lacking heirs, he bequeathed his title to you over his nephews. You and I only met briefly during the latter years of my father's reign. Yet I have observed you from afar. You combine a scholarly background with a knack for deft political maneuvering. You and Dolan have nearly rid the nobility of all who openly speak against Felrook. Nobles who hope to appease the emperor will be reluctant to install me as their new monarch."

"Would they be right to worry?" Copernum asked.

"I don't intend to court the emperor," Galloran said flatly. "I will not pay him tribute. I will not let him dictate policy. I will not ignore his aggressive expansion. I will not enter into lopsided compromises. Those kingdoms who have tried to appease Felrook have all fallen. A gentle approach toward the rising empire will inevitably bring an end to our sovereignty."

"Have you considered that perhaps you are a decade too late?" Copernum asked. "Have you recognized that the only remaining option besides aligning ourselves with the emperor is obliteration?"

“I will never submit to Maldor,” Galloran stated.

“Interesting. I have been led to believe that you no longer require that blindfold.”

“I accepted eyes from Maldor,” Galloran admitted assertively. “He offered them years ago. I finally claimed them. But I made no pledge of fealty.”

“And yet some of his top spies now share your eyes,” Copernum chuckled. “How do you intend to resist an enemy who can watch your every move?”

“With a blindfold in place.”

“Then why accept the eyes?”

“For those moments when I need to see in order to kill.”

“Very dramatic,” Copernum approved glibly. “Tell me, why are you wearing the blindfold now?”

“Partly as a courtesy,” Galloran said. “I was unsure whether you would want the emperor to know we had conversed.”

“You told me not to play the fool,” Copernum said. “Let me be direct. The emperor is not my foe. I have kept Trensicourt intact by maintaining positive relations with Felrook. I have nothing to hide from Maldor. If the emperor cares to know, I would happily divulge all we discuss this night. I would not do so out of disloyalty toward Trensicourt. I would do it to protect Trensicourt. I would do it so that men who care about Trensicourt might be permitted to run this kingdom rather than callous imperial governors.”

Galloran began untying his blindfold. “By your description, are you not becoming an imperial governor yourself?” Galloran removed the blindfold, revealing one brown eye, the other blue. His gaze was hard.

Rachel did not appreciate the reminder that agents of Maldor were observing all that Galloran saw. She loved and trusted Galloran, but the thought made those mismatched eyes seem sinister. At least they weren’t focused on her.

Copernum looked mildly disconcerted by the stare. “Dolan does not take orders from Felrook. Neither do I. We make certain allowances to preserve the peace.”

“I know plenty about the allowances you have made,” Galloran said. “More than enough to label you a traitor and have you hanged.”

Copernum bristled, but he held his tongue for a moment. He took a bite from a fat wedge of cheese and chewed thoughtfully before responding. “I wondered how long it would take before this discussion turned unpleasant. You have not yet been crowned, sir. In fact, you have left your alleged right to the throne

unclaimed for years. Currently, Dolan is custodian of this kingdom and holds the highest legal authority.”

“Are you insinuating I will have to take Trensicourt by force?” Galloran asked.

Copernum shrugged casually. “Do I think you could? Possibly. Martyrs tend to win the best reputations. As far as this kingdom is concerned, you have been dead for more than ten years. Your repute has grown accordingly. You have been aggrandized into a folk hero, more legend than man. Your agents have whispered rumors foretelling your return for months, and the rumors have taken hold. The city is waiting for you, watching for you, many not believing, but most hoping. I expect you could rally many to your cause.”

“Not enough?” Galloran asked.

“That depends. As of yet I have refrained from planting rumors of my own. Rumors that Galloran sold his eyes and his loyalty to the emperor to buy his freedom. Rumors that Galloran has been living in imperial luxury while the people of Trensicourt have toiled in doubt and fear. Rumors that Galloran lost his mind at Felrook, leaving him driven to fight Maldor at all cost, even if it means destroying the kingdom in a hopeless war. These and many other stories could be circulated. In Trensicourt nothing moves faster than rumors.”

“Why have you refrained?”

“I was not yet sure whether you were my adversary. We do not have to be enemies. It is likely that you could lead Trensicourt far more effectively than Dolan. Of course, if we become enemies, I will have to remind you that many of the best fighting men of Trensicourt are unswervingly loyal to their liege lords, the nobles. And the nobles are loyal to Dolan. And to me. Naturally, if we needed imperial aid to maintain control of Trensicourt, Felrook would gladly intervene.”

Galloran finally began to lose his temper. “If you bring imperial troops into Trensicourt, they will never leave.”

“We have never allowed an imperial host into the city for that precise reason,” Copernum hurriedly agreed. “We would only consider such rash action if our government were threatened.” He grinned like a shark.

Galloran gave a nod. One nostril twitched. His whole body looked tense, ready to snap. He almost managed to keep his tone conversational. “You have spoken plainly. Let me be equally clear. I have already been in communication with many of the lesser lords, as well as some key members of the upper aristocracy. You might be surprised how many of the blue bloods remain loyal to

the crown. If you force my hand, tomorrow I will offer an ultimatum to the nobles of Trensicourt—side with their king or perish as traitors. I have no intention of waging open war to reclaim my kingdom. My foes will be eliminated, and we will see where their leaderless minions stand afterward. There are insufficient imperial troops to reach this region in time to hinder me. If you were foolish enough to try to summon them, even your most stalwart supporters would abandon you. A revolution won't take months or weeks. It will require three days."

"Well spoken," Copernum conceded. "A skeptic might wonder how you propose to collectively assassinate the most powerful men in the kingdom."

Galloran glanced at Rachel. With a jolt of panic she realized he was asking for a demonstration. Something to intimidate Copernum. The tension in the room was palpable, both sides trying to seem calm and in control, each side wondering how much the other was bluffing. The negotiation could go either way. A lot was riding on how she performed.

Rachel told herself that she had practiced these techniques for months. But what if she pushed too hard and the suggestion failed? What if she didn't push hard enough? Copernum was a cunning man. What if he had studied how to resist Edomic suggestions? What if he was immune?

The moment was passing. Doing nothing would be the same as failure. Mustering her will and relying on her training, Rachel spoke a pointed Edomic suggestion. Copernum flopped to the floor, striking his cheek on the edge of the table on his way down. Relieved that the directive had worked so well, she spoke again, and his body went rigid. Io crouched beside him and ran a forefinger across his throat.

Rachel briefly met eyes with Galloran. His glowing approval reflected her quiet elation, reinforcing the feeling of triumph. Then she thought about displacers watching her little display through those same eyes, and the emotion was tainted.

Copernum remained immobile for longer than normal. A full ten seconds elapsed before he arose, looking pale and shaken, a bruise starting to form on his cheek. "A compelling exhibition," he sniffed, letting his worried gaze dance between Rachel and Galloran. He reclaimed his seat, brushed off his sleeves, and tried to regain his composure.

"I invite skeptics to doubt my capabilities," Galloran said, his voice iron. "But any skeptic would have a poor knowledge of Trensicourt if he hoped to

stand against the tide of humanity that will rise up to welcome their king home.”

“What do you expect from me?” Copernum demanded.

“I don’t want my kingdom in an uproar,” Galloran said. “I want my kingdom united. I am willing to concede that, however misguided your dealings with Felrook have been, you may have had the best interest of Trensicourt at heart. My kingdom remains independent, at least in name, and for this I am grateful. If you, Dolan, and the nobles you influence welcome the return of your king and support a quick, smooth transition, you will retain your titles and holdings. You will enjoy a full pardon for any past misdeeds, and need only look to your future behavior with any fear of reprisal.”

“That is your offer?” Copernum asked.

“In essence.”

“Am I to believe that I will remain chancellor?”

“Another presently has claim to that office,” Galloran said.

“Lord Jason abandoned his post,” Copernum reminded gently.

“Lord Jason never resigned,” Galloran corrected. “He has been on errands with me. You will continue to serve as chancellor until Lord Jason returns. Once Jason rejoins us, you would be welcome to challenge him for the position. Your other titles and holdings will remain as they stand.”

Copernum leaned forward. “You will confirm our titles and holdings in writing? You will document an unconditional immunity regarding any perceived injustices of the past?”

“Indeed. In return I will require full cooperation. Not just assistance arranging my prompt coronation, but also support of my strategies going forward.”

Copernum narrowed his eyes and nodded slightly. “As a future collaborator, might I be entitled to a preview of your intentions?”

“It is no mystery,” Galloran said. “I will stand firmly against Felrook. More firmly than Trensicourt has ever stood.”

Copernum glanced around the room. “Are those present meant to imply you have support from the Amar Kabal, the drinlings, and the children of Certius?”

“Trensicourt will not stand alone against Felrook,” Galloran replied. “Time is precious, Copernum. You have tonight to confer with your cohorts. I expect an unambiguous response on the morrow. Anything less will be deemed an act of treason against your rightful king, punishable as such.”



Copernum bowed his head in thought. “The emperor will be sorely displeased.”

Galloran straightened in his chair. “I vow to do much more than displease him.”

Copernum looked up. “I applaud your nerve. If I seem less than ecstatic, please understand, my reluctance does not grow out of a love for the emperor. A tenuous peace has been cultivated with Felrook for years, which has enabled us to prosper while other kingdoms crumble.”

“What you call peace the emperor calls postponement,” Galloran said. “Aside from the Seven Vales, we are the best-defended sovereignty in all of Lyrian. He would rather wait to crush Trensicourt until he can focus all his clout on the task. That day is not far off. It will come after Kadara falls. We must take action before we become the last kingdom of men to topple.”

Copernum folded his hands on the table. “I comprehend your terms. How shall I deliver the reply?”

“I will station representatives at the covered bridge over Cobble Creek. Your response should arrive by noon, carried by no more than two riders. Thereafter, we will confer accordingly.”

Copernum rose. “I expect all will be as you hope, my prince. You seem as capable and committed as your reputation warrants, undiminished by your past hardships. By way of explanation for my adversarial conduct tonight, there was concern that Felrook could have left you unbalanced. Rightful heir or not, Dolan and I had no intention of handing Trensicourt over to a madman or to a broken exile who had clearly been corrupted by the emperor. These times demand a watchful eye and a steady hand. You have more than allayed my concerns. I look forward to serving with you once we take care of the formalities.” He bowed deeply, removing his hat and pausing for a beat with his head down.

Galloran stood, as did the others around the table. “If all proceeds as you describe, I look forward to our partnership leading Trensicourt into a brighter future.”

Copernum nodded at the others in turn, his gaze lingering longest on Rachel. She found a wary respect in his eyes.

Kerick led Copernum’s horse from the stall. The chancellor put on his cloak, adjusted his hood, and mounted up. He bid them farewell and departed into the rainy night.

Rachel finally relaxed as Copernum passed out of sight. If the choice were hers, she hoped never to see him again.

Galloran replaced his blindfold. The incessant patter of rainfall had receded into white noise during the meeting, but it gained renewed prominence in the silence. An unseen horse in one of the stalls stamped and whinnied.

“All clear,” called a voice from above, startling Rachel. She looked up and saw Nedwin dangling from a rafter, the length of his body reducing the drop to less than eight feet. He let go and landed on the floor in a crouch.

“I didn’t know you were up there,” Rachel said.

“That was the idea,” Nedwin replied, crossing to Galloran. “My task was to monitor our guests. I took up my position just after the meeting began.”

“We never agreed to your entering the stable,” Galloran said.

“I had to hear,” Nedwin said. “I stayed quiet. You didn’t want Copernum to see me. He never saw me.”

“I didn’t want you to see him,” Galloran responded. “That could not have been easy.”

Nedwin forced a smile. There was no warmth in it. Rachel could understand. Copernum had held Nedwin prisoner and tortured him for years. Copernum had also harmed Nedwin’s family, stealing away his elder brother’s title by defeating him in a battle of wits. “I’ll tell you what was easy—the negotiation. Much too easy.”

“Happy to install me as king so he can betray me later?” Galloran asked.

“Sounded that way,” Kerick said. “After issuing all those pardons, you’ll be surrounded by enemies. The majority of your ruling class will be spying for Felrook.”

“Agreed,” Galloran said. “Fortunately, I don’t intend to wage this war with secrets. Nor do I intend to remain in Trensicourt for long. I need Trensicourt for manpower. My faith is in the prophecy. Once I am crowned, all my effort will go into mobilizing for war.”

“To that end you need control of the kingdom,” Nedwin said. “Quickly and without bloodshed.”

“To leave evil men unpunished and in positions of power is a grievous cost,” Galloran said heavily. “The injustice sickens me. Yet I see no alternative. Not given our time frame and our goals.”

“Rotten apples stay spoiled,” Nedwin said. “Copernum and his allies will hang themselves with future crimes.”

“Let’s hope those crimes aren’t the end of us,” Bartley added.

“The viscount has a point,” Galloran said. “We can’t be too careful over the coming weeks. Including tonight. Our location and numbers have been observed by the most dangerous man in the current government. A surprise attack is possible. Stormy or not, we should make haste to our next temporary residence.”

Rachel sighed softly. It would be nice to stay here, warm and dry, at least for the night. But she supposed that if staying elsewhere might prevent them from being slaughtered in their sleep, she probably shouldn’t complain.

# DURNA

The walled city of Durna was positioned more than two miles upslope from the coast of the Inland Sea. The many buildings near the fortified waterfront were connected to the city by a protected highway. The walls around the port rose thirty feet, the walls along the highway were perhaps half as high, and the city walls soared to more than sixty feet.

Jason was beginning to catch on that the major cities of Lyrian had all been constructed to withstand invasions. Maldor was clearly not the first threat these kingdoms had faced.

The battle-worn fortifications of Durna were gouged and scarred. Mismatched stonework showed where broken sections had been replaced. Construction was underway down by the port, restoring shattered battlements. Although the ancient walls loomed tall and thick, anchored to imposing towers, they hadn't done their job. The king of Durna had surrendered to Maldor. He and his family were currently prisoners of the emperor.

"The port gates are the only entrances," Jasher explained. "There is one on the west side and another on the east, both heavily guarded. The only access to the city proper is to follow the highway up from the port."

"There have to be hidden ways through or under those walls," Aram said, surveying the city. "Durna is too big. Nobles. Criminals. They would grow weary of taking the long route. They would demand private passages. The city has stood for too long."

Bat, one of the two drinlings who had accompanied them on horseback, folded his brawny arms. "You're probably right. But we don't know of any." After traveling with the group for less than a week, the drinlings had already lost their accents.

"And we can't steal a ship unless we access the port," added the other drinling, a solid man named Ux.

"Can't we just stroll in through a gate along with the crowd?" Jason asked.

“Possibly,” Jasher said. “Security will be tighter here than what you have encountered in the past.”

“A governor called Duke Ashby oversees Durna for Maldor,” Drake explained. “He is competent and driven.”

Ux peered at the city through a spyglass. “We’ve found security to be a serious obstacle. Of course the entrances are heavily monitored, but we’ve witnessed wandering patrols and random searches as well.”

“We’ve been entering the city by water,” Bat said. “One at a time. Swimming. We reach the docks from the sea, looping around the huge defensive breakwaters in the small hours of the night. A two-hour swim at a brisk pace. The harbor is well guarded.”

Jason looked out at the harbor. From their current vantage in a grove of tall, slender trees, they had an elevated view of the west side of town. The water of the Inland Sea looked gray-green under the predawn glow from the overcast sky. The port walls did not end at the water. Rather they extended out into the sea, encircling the harbor, with only a relatively narrow gap to allow vessels access.

“Too hard of a swim for us?” Jason asked.

“I expect,” Bat said. “Drinlings don’t tire.”

“What about a small boat?” Farfalee wondered.

“The harbor mouth is well illuminated,” Ux said. “The risk is great even as a lone swimmer.”

“Then we’ll probably have to brave the gates,” Jasher said. “Which poses some problems. The whole empire is on the lookout for Lord Jason. Corinne is too regal and lovely. And we seedfolk are almost as conspicuous as you drinlings.”

Jason glanced at the drinlings. Their golden-brown coloring was just outside the normal spectrum of human skin tones. And the coppery tint of their irises looked a little too metallic.

“Which is why we enter Durna quietly and lie low,” Ux said. “Our kind would be detained on sight.”

“My amar is gone,” Drake said. “I can cut my hair short and make sure my clothes cover the scar at the back of my neck. Farfalee can wear her hair long and just not roll it up over her seed.”

“I suppose if I trim my hair shorter and don’t roll it I could pass as human,” Jasher said. He raked his fingers through his long tresses. “Let it barely touch my shoulders, subtly cover the amar without giving me away. I dislike the feel of it, but I’ve done it before.”

“We’ll need nondescript clothing,” Farfalee mentioned.

“These robes don’t blend?” Jason asked.

Aram began to wheeze and grunt. Veins bulged in his thick neck. He backed away into the grove, looking for some privacy as he shrank with the veiled dawn. A couple of the horses neighed at his approach.

Jasher looked around. “I feel too exposed here.”

“We have operated mostly from the woods on this side of town,” Bat said. “We’ll see trouble coming long before they see us.”

There were numerous groves on this wild part of the slope above the Inland Sea. Jason and the others had taken up position here in the night, after weaving between some of the farms and outlying settlements south of Durna.

Aram returned, adjusting a smaller set of robes, face damp with perspiration. “You could let me go in alone and try to ferret out a secret entrance. I have experience with this sort of thing. We have plenty of money for bribes.”

Farfalee shook her head. “I think Jason had it right from the start.” Jason tried to resist a proud grin as she continued. “We should flow into town with the morning crowd, in ones and twos. People come here to buy and trade. They come looking for work. They come for entertainment. The imperial guardsmen may be watching for Jason, but almost certainly none here have ever seen him. We dress as peasants. We look humble and hungry, and walk into the city with the rest of the unwashed masses.”

“Bat and I could bring the swords,” Ux offered. “Jason’s and Corinne’s. Even sheathed they would draw interest. They look too fine. Unsheathed they would immediately give you away. We’ll swim them in.”

“What about my armor?” Aram asked. “My sword?”

“Your sword would drag us straight to the bottom,” Bat said.

“We could use it to anchor a ship,” Ux grunted.

“I could pose as a wealthy merchant,” Drake offered. “Well fed, well dressed, a debonair peddler of oversized weaponry.”

Farfalee laughed derisively. “Why not portray a wealthy noble on a pilgrimage? We could supply you with riches and hire servants. Our weapons could be disguised in your armory.”

“Don’t give me ideas,” Drake warned, eyes flashing with relish.

Jason couldn’t shake the feeling that they were making this harder than it needed to be. “Do we have to take everything into the city?” he asked. “I mean, we’re only going there to steal a ship and leave. What if we reunited on the water?”

Farfalee nodded pensively. "We would have to get hold of a smaller craft outside the city and rendezvous beyond the harbor mouth."

"There are many options," Bat said. "Finding a small craft would not be difficult."

"What if Farfalee, Corinne, and one of the drinlings met us on the water?" Jasher proposed. "They could bring Aram's gear, the torivorian swords, and the orantium. We shouldn't need the globes for our hijacking. Success will depend on slipping away quietly."

"I would prefer to help cover the hijacking with my bow," Farfalee said.

"That would be ideal," Jasher said. "It might not be wise. You and Corinne are too attractive. You'll stand out more than the rest of us going into the city. With a tireless drinling on the oars, a rendezvous at sea might be a reasonable solution."

"We will need to know how to meet," Farfalee said.

"I can still swim into the city," Ux offered. "Then I can swim out with the details. Bat could stay with you. Then the two of us can help you manage your boat."

Farfalee sighed. "My bow could be useful inside the city, but I admit that this alternative would reduce the overall risk."

"I'll stay close to Jason," Jasher promised. "Aram and Drake can make their way into the city separately."

"So no servants for me?" Drake verified. "Not even one? Maybe an older fellow? Or a kid?"

"Maybe next time," Jasher consoled. "For the present, we need to locate some apparel."

"I'll go," Aram offered. "When I'm small, I'm the least conspicuous of us."

"I'll follow him," Drake said. "The rest of you lie low and try to stay out of trouble."

\* \* \*

The following morning Jason trudged toward the western gate. He wore coarse, itchy trousers and a long shirt with laces over the chest. His dingy old boots had hard soles and were falling apart. Six copper drooma clinked in one pocket.

He followed a wagon and a group of people on foot. The wagon kicked up dust, which he did not try to avoid, since he knew that whatever clung to him would improve his disguise.

Aram had cautioned him to enter the city as part of a group. The crowd would pressure the guardsmen to hurry and be less thorough.

Jason did his best not to glance back at Jasher, who trailed him by a few hundred yards. Jasher was unarmed except for a knife. The seedman toted several pots and pans, as if he meant to sell them. His hair had been shortened to barely reach his shoulders, and he wore a flat twilled cap.

The port wall loomed ever closer. Uniformed guards patrolled the top, coming in and out of view among the battlements. The others on the road paid little heed to Jason.

At last the wagon slowed and then stopped in the shadow of the open gates. A bespectacled man in a raised booth watched the proceedings with a narrow gaze, quill in hand, parchment ready. Jason counted five soldiers on the ground.

The man in the wagon began shouting answers about his cargo to the man with the quill. A pair of guardsmen searched his wagon, looking underneath and examining the bales and barrels in the bed.

None of the people on foot were allowed to proceed without questioning. A line formed as the quantity of people seeking admittance outnumbered the guards. Jason felt nervous as he took his place in line. He struggled to keep his expression neutral. He avoided eye contact with the guards but tried not to deliberately look away from them either.

The wagon was waved through, freeing up a couple of the guards. The line began to move faster. A husky man with a thick mustache and stubbly jowls confronted Jason. "Name?"

"Lucas, son of Travis."

"State your business."

"I have to find Gulleg the barber. I have a bad tooth."

The guard grunted and squinted. "You're not familiar. Where are you from?"

"I'm up from Laga."

"Laga? Quite a trip."

Jason rubbed the side of his jaw. "A man back home tried to help but made it worse. I was told Gulleg is the best. I've been walking two days straight. Can't sleep with the pain."

"Duration of your stay?"

"I'm hoping Gulleg can see me today."

The guard harrumphed softly. "You were told right. Gulleg is good with teeth. Took care of my brother last year. Hope you brought money."

"Six drooma," Jason said, jangling his pocket proudly.



“Six?” the guard snickered. “Gulleg is no country barber. But he does have a soft spot for the downtrodden. He might find a way for you to sweat off the difference. You keep out of trouble. And keep off the streets. We don’t tolerate vagrants.”

The hefty guard moved away, his attention shifting to a lanky man with a handcart. Jason strolled past the gate, praying that he looked less conspicuous than he felt. The exchange had gone as planned, right down to him not having quite enough money.

Jason was not supposed to wait for Jasher. The seedman would follow as he chose. The next step was to find the Salt Sea Inn, a small establishment about ten buildings inland from the waterfront, on a road called Galley Street. The port of Durna alone had more structures and businesses than many of the towns Jason had seen in Lyrian.

The main road leading away from the gate was broad and busy. Up ahead a pair of mounted soldiers was squabbling with a man, insisting he move his wagon. The teamster kept maintaining that he needed to unload supplies.

Deciding he would rather steer clear of confrontations with soldiers involved, Jason turned down a side street. On one side of the lane a line had formed near a dilapidated cart, where a bony woman ladled chowder from a deep vat. The beige concoction looked thick and chunky. It smelled delicious.

Jason had copper in his pocket, and he was hungry, but his orders were to proceed directly to the inn. He continued down the street, noticing other carts on the sides selling goods or food, although none were as busy as the chowder cart.

Not one building in the port area stood taller than three stories, unless you counted the pair of bell towers near the water. The structures tended to be low, square, and solid—some residences, some businesses.

After winding around for some time, and asking directions twice, Jason found Galley Street. It was narrow, grimy, and crowded, and it featured lots of inns. The air smelled of salt water and burned food.

Not long after reaching Galley Street, Jason found a battered board hanging over a nondescript entrance. Weathered and cracked, the light-blue board held the words “Salt Sea Inn,” hand painted in black by an amateur. The establishment looked narrower than many of the inns on the street, and among the least prosperous. The Salt Sea Inn had small, grimy windows, and the unremarkable door was six steps down from street level.

Jason descended the steps and entered. The common room reeked of fried fish, sweat, and wood smoke. Craggy men slumped at tables or at the bar, many of them alone. Jason saw no women, and no groups larger than three. He caught a few sidelong glances, surly looks that hinted he didn't belong.

Without a plan, Jason would have backed out onto the street and found another inn. But he was supposed to find the curly-haired barkeeper and ask for a room with a view of the coast. That was how Bat had explained Jason would connect with Nia and the other drinlings.

Behind the bar a man with curly brown hair was wiping a mug with a dirty rag. A tiny hoop pierced one ear, and tattoos crawled across his wiry forearms. Jason crossed to him and leaned against the bar, hoping he looked less out of place than he felt.

"What'll it be?" the barman asked.

"I need a room with a view of the coast," Jason said.

The barman smirked. "Nothing like that here, mate. Ashley can show you what we have. Ashley!"

"One moment," a female voice answered from the kitchen.

A man seated at the bar swiveled to face Jason. He had a droopy face with rough skin and three parallel scars on his jaw. Silver teeth glinted as he spoke. "What are you playing at, bumpkin?"

"Excuse me?" Jason said.

"Look at the manners on this one!" the man chuckled, brushing shaggy hair back from his brow. "You smell like dung. Run back to your farm, boy. This place is for men of the sea."

Jason noticed that the comments had drawn the attention of some of the other customers. They appeared to share the sentiment. At best they looked amused by the prospect of trouble. Several expressions seemed hostile. Should he try to ignore the insult? Should he stand up for himself? He didn't want to draw too much attention.

"I could use bodies in my rooms," the barman intervened.

The man at the bar waved away the comment. "I can leave his body wherever you like. Go on, hayseed, scurry out of here. Last chance."

"Morley, I can't have you running off paying—"

"I'll cover the cost of the room," Morley barked. "Unless you'd side with a stranger over a regular?"

Everyone in the room was watching intently. The curly-haired barman shrugged. "It's your money, Morley." The barkeeper locked eyes with Jason.

“You had better go.”

Jason was at a loss. He needed to connect with Nia. But if he started a fight, it could lead to lots of unwanted attention. Soldiers might get involved. Also, alone and unarmed he would probably end up dead.

“Is there a problem here?” asked a voice from behind.

Jason glanced back to find Jasher crossing the room. The seedman had already discarded his pots and pans. Jason felt relief at the sight of him, and also a bit embarrassed that he had messed up a simple task by seeming too out of place.

“What’s it to you?” asked Morley.

“I sent my servant ahead to book a room,” Jasher replied.

Jason took the cue and gave a shamefaced half bow toward Jasher.

Morley looked over at Jason and coughed out a harsh laugh. “Fine servant you found! What are you, brothers? Cousins? You two had better shove off. Take your comedy elsewhere. You picked the wrong inn.” Morley turned and hunched over the bar as if the discussion were finished. He picked up a bone off the platter before him and nibbled at the scant remaining meat.

Jasher approached the man calmly, his expression serious but not overtly threatening. Most other men in the room watched with interest, some hiding their attention better than others. Jasher stopped directly behind Morley. “Would you care to explain yourself?”

“To a farmhand?” The man spun and stabbed a dagger at Jasher. The seedman twisted, avoiding the thrust, and grabbed Morley’s extended arm at the wrist. With his free hand Jasher seized Morley by his shaggy hair and flung him to the floor.

Still clutching his dagger, Morley glared up at Jasher.

“Stay down,” Jasher warned. “Isn’t there enough trouble in your life without seeking more?”

“Who do you think—” Morley began as he started to rise. He didn’t get more out, because Jasher kicked him hard in the ankle, a quick sweeping motion that dumped Morley back onto the ground.

Jason managed not to flinch away from the sudden flurry of motion. He tried to watch the crowd in case somebody attacked Jasher from behind. He noticed a bottle on the bar that might serve as a better weapon than nothing if things escalated.

“Don’t try to get up again, or you’ll lose the option,” Jasher threatened. “Crawl out of here. Don’t provoke strangers. You never know who you’re

speaking with.”

“You somebody important?” Morley mocked. “Growing some nice carrots this year?”

Jasher’s expression remained stern but controlled. “You assume too much, friend. I know what you are. I know what this place is. In your line of work, have you never played a part? Have you never dressed or acted out of character?” Jasher looked around the room in disgust. “How raw are the amateurs in this town if the patrons of an establishment such as this assume everyone is as they appear? Are we your first visitors from beyond the region?”

The crowd seemed mildly embarrassed. The reaction made Jason relax a bit. They might manage to bluff their way out of this after all. Morley was temporarily at a loss for words. When he spoke, there was uncertainty in his tone. “We get word when talent comes in from abroad.”

“Depends on the talent,” Jasher scoffed. “My business was not with anyone in this room. This may astonish you, but in my line of work, depending on the stakes, I don’t always want my business known. And now I have a roomful of attention. I had heard better things of Durna than this. I want your full name, Morley.”

Morley put away his knife. Fear twinkled behind his eyes. “Don’t be that way. I was just having a laugh. Maybe the disguise worked too well.”

Jasher met eyes with many of the men in the room. “Is this space secure?”

He got a few nods and grunted affirmations.

Jasher turned back to Morley. “It better be. So help me, friend, if this sparks trouble, you’ll answer to fiercer men than I.”

Morley got to his feet. “These are good lads. You’re in safe company.”

Jasher gave a curt nod. “Then let’s pretend we never spoke and that none of us have heard of the Order of the Noose.”

At this last phrase Jason noticed many eyes widen. A majority of the men turned away. Morley set some drooma on the counter and hastily limped toward the door. Jasher posed like he was considering what to do next. Jason tried not to draw attention.

The bartender cleared his throat. “My apologies for your trouble, sir. You’re welcome to a room here, on the house.”

Jasher surveyed the area. Nobody met his gaze. “I’d prefer to pay,” he finally said in a lowered voice. “I’m more at ease when others are indebted to me.”

The barkeeper bobbed his head. “As you will. Ashley?”

A woman scurried around the counter, eager to please. She had reddish hair and a broad build, and wore a conciliatory smile. "Right this way, if you please."

Jason followed Jasher, keeping silent as he tried to play the role of humble servant. Ashley led them into a comfortable room, closing the door behind them. She mentioned a couple of amenities as she handed Jasher the key. He thanked her.

"Did you have to mention the Order?" she asked.

Jasher shrugged. "The circumstances required intimidation. I had to sound like somebody to be reckoned with. You'll notice I didn't directly claim membership."

"Well, you certainly got their attention," Ashley said.

"She knows what we're doing here?" Jason verified.

"Ashley and her husband are part of the resistance here in Durna," Jasher said. "They're harboring a third of our drinlings."

"Sorry about the cold reception," Ashley said. "The local smugglers have claimed the Salt Sea Inn as their own. The arrangement has advantages. Since most of the aristocrats smuggle goods to some degree, the smugglers keep the authorities from snooping around much. But the clientele can be unruly, and lately they've been more territorial than ever."

"So the Order of the Noose is a smuggling ring?" Jason checked.

"A secret order," Jasher said. "Most laymen have never heard the name. It is never mentioned casually. Even the boldest smugglers only refer to the Order with reverence."

Ashley folded her arms. "Now every smuggler in town will be wondering what business the Order has here."

"Better than them speculating about seedmen and drinlings," Jasher said. "The Order seldom, if ever, crosses the emperor. If word trickles up to the local soldiers, it shouldn't create much of a stir. Your patrons will be curious, but they won't look too hard. The Order has too deadly a reputation."

"Unless some of them decide you were bluffing," Ashley warned.

"We'll keep out of sight," Jasher said simply. "There will be nothing to investigate."

"Let's hope not," Ashley said. "Stay put for now. We'll move you to your actual quarters after the inn gets quiet." She exited the room. Jasher bolted the door.

"You were great back there," Jason said. "Thanks for bailing me out. I was making a mess of things."

“No harm done,” Jasher said. “It’s to your credit that you seem out of place among those men.”

“Now we wait?”

Jasher gave a nod. “We hope for a long, uneventful day.”

\* \* \*

Jasher got his wish. It was the small hours of the night before a cloaked figure holding a candle jostled Jason awake. Wiping his eyes, Jason accepted a hand as the figure helped him to his feet.

The figure was more than half a head shorter than him. The hood flipped back, and Jason recognized Nia. Jasher stood behind her.

“I heard you were winning friends today,” she told Jason with a smile. Nia looked older, well into her thirties. She was as fit as ever, but her features had noticeably leaned out and matured. Nia had looked to be in her early twenties when he’d last seen her. He supposed that with a life expectancy not much more than two years, such changes were inevitable.

“I have a way with smugglers,” Jason replied.

“Me too,” she said. “It’s called hiding. Let’s get you to safer quarters.”

They moved out into the hall. The few undersized windows were tightly shuttered. Nia led them to some stairs, then down another hall. They stopped at a grimy window that overlooked a cramped, filthy courtyard with a single door. It looked like part of an alley that had been walled in by buildings.

Nia opened the window, climbed out, dangled, and dropped. Jason did likewise, followed by Jasher. Nia jerked her chin at the door. “Looks like a back door to one of the surrounding businesses. It’s actually the front door to a collection of rooms with no opening out to the street. Just this entrance and a hatch up to the roof. A perfect spot to lie low.”

Nia used a key to open the door. A pair of broad, heavily muscled drinlings stood guard just inside, swords ready. Taking a small oil lamp from a shelf, Nia led Jason and Jasher past the stolid guards, then up two flights of stairs and through a doorway to a windowless room.

While Nia closed the door, Jason and Jasher sat down on a cot. She flung her cloak over the back of a chair and sat as well.

“How are the others?” Jasher asked.

“Aram and Drake arrived safely,” she confirmed. “They didn’t pick any fights with locals.”

“He started it,” Jason complained.

“We know,” Nia assured him. “The owners are rightfully chagrined. Their regular customers keep creating problems for those involved with their secret enterprises. A few of the smugglers suspect something is going on around here and are curious. They prod and pry when they can.”

“Sounds like this won’t be a safe haven much longer,” Jasher said.

Nia shrugged. “They should probably stop housing rebels here for a season. Any real suspicion from the authorities could prove disastrous. Farfalee and Corinne will meet us on the water?”

“Along with Bat and Ux,” Jasher said. “I saw no warship in port.”

“The *Valiant* is scheduled to arrive in three days.”

“We’ll take it the first night?” Jasher verified.

“That’s the plan.”

“We want a specific ship?” Jason asked.

Nia nodded. “An interceptor. Maldor constructed a fleet of eighty to win the western coast and conquer Meridon. He only built three to cover the Inland Sea. And three were all he has needed. Big warships have never sailed these waters. The smaller vessels are no match for an interceptor.”

“Where are the other two interceptors?” Jasher inquired.

“They reliably sail between Angial, Russock, and Durna. They mostly patrol the coasts, stopping unpredictably at the smaller towns. Occasionally they check the islands. Except for Windbreak, of course. No sane person would set foot there.”

“Do you know how to sail a ship?” Jason asked.

Nia waved a casual hand. “I try not to fret about the minor details.”

“You’re kidding,” Jason checked.

“A few of us have some nautical experience,” Nia said. “Mostly we’ll rely on Aram’s instruction.”

“We have the required manpower?” Jasher asked.

“Yes,” Nia replied. “We can spare eight fighters to help us get out of the harbor and still retain enough drinlings to crew the ship, along with eighteen fighters down below to pull the six emergency sweeps.”

“Resources?” Jasher pursued.

“We’re all armed, with supplies to spare. Three clans contributed warriors and funds. This will be the biggest drinling offensive in many lifetimes.”

“Have things been quiet here in town?” Jason wondered.

“No revolt in years. After the city fell to Maldor, the serious dissenters were weeded out. The smugglers and traders support a healthy black market, much of

which is unofficially permitted. The guardsmen have grown overconfident, the leadership complacent.”

Jasher clapped his hands together. “Good tidings at last. The next few days should be uncomplicated.”

“We’ll need to stay out of sight,” Nia said. “Surprise is crucial. If our foes catch wind of our plot, it won’t work. They have ready means to block the harbor mouth, and troops to spare.”

Jason frowned. “I hope no smugglers draw attention to us.”

“We’ll keep our ears open,” Nia said.

“I’ll help,” Jason assured her. “Your hearing may have started to go.” He had started teasing Nia about her age after she had begun to flaunt looking older than him back at Mianamon.

Nia leaped from her chair and slugged Jason on the shoulder, a response she had learned from Rachel. Except Nia hit a lot harder. If they worked at it, drinlings could pack on pounds of muscle overnight. Apparently, she had kept up with her exercising. “You using a razor yet?”

Jason grinned. This felt more familiar. The Nia he remembered had been brash and playful. “I’m glad you can still tease. I was worried you’d gotten all serious in your old age.”

“Nope. Just smarter, stronger, and more mature. You wouldn’t understand.”

Jason looked around the windowless room. “I’m glad we’ll get to rest for a few days. I’m sick of sleeping on the ground.”

“We’ll have time to strategize,” Jasher said with relief.

“We’ll watch and listen,” Nia added.

“And sleep?” Jason asked hopefully, stretching his arms.

Nia gave a nod. “Those of us who need it.”



# CORONATION

Not only did everyone in Trensicourt turn out for the procession, but many from the surrounding countryside had flooded into the city as well. Peasants and nobles, grandparents and youngsters, tradesmen and merchants and farmers alike lined the streets, rooftops, and balconies of the parade route. Bells sang throughout the great city. Vendors hawked baked treats, sweet nuts, and handkerchiefs emblazoned with the royal crest of Trensicourt. Spectators hollered and cheered, waving arms and handkerchiefs and banners. Many laughed. Many wept.

Arrayed in splendid ceremonial armor, the rightful king of Trensicourt rode at the front of the procession on an enormous white charger, gleaming like a knight from a fairy tale. Flanked by a mounted honor guard, eyes uncovered, Galloran took his time, waving and pausing to greet individuals packed along the edges of the road. Flowers and garlands snowed down from the crowded rooftops and terraces.

Behind Galloran came a cavalcade of five hundred horsemen, riding in formation. Thousands of foot soldiers followed, bearing pikes, axes, or swords. After them marched troupes of musicians, filling the air with music, followed by an athletic host of drummers and dancers, leaping and tumbling through the streets. Jesters capered about, pulling pranks and feigning clumsy accidents with one another. Jugglers followed, and acrobats, and men who performed startling feats with fire. At last rolled a gilded coach, from which Dolan hurled handfuls of bronze drooma into the jubilant crowd. A large honor guard protected the burnished vehicle.

Leaning against the stone railing of a palace balcony, Rachel surveyed the scene. From the lofty vantage, the crowd noise shrank to a distant roar, and the members of the parade were reduced to tiny figures gradually advancing in tidy patterns. She wished she could be closer to the excitement.

Ferrin peered through a long telescope. He passed it to Rachel, allowing her to zoom in and observe details. She found Galloran leaning down from his horse

to shake the hand of an elated boy in the crowd.

“Quite a turnout on short notice,” Ferrin approved.

“I had less than a week to make the arrangements,” Copernum sniffed. “But the prospect of Galloran returning provided all the motivation necessary to prod extra effort out of everyone involved and to draw a prodigious crowd. I have never beheld the populace more swollen with emotion.”

“They sure love him,” Rachel said, lowering the telescope.

“How could they resist?” Copernum replied. “A figure of legend has descended from the heavens to walk among them. Most know little of Galloran the man. They are infatuated with the idea of him. They have swapped tall tales about him. They consider him the lost treasure of our kingdom. It will be interesting to study how their attitudes evolve as he dwells among them.”

“For most men that would pose a larger problem,” Ferrin said. “The reality of Galloran does much justice to the tales. I’ve never met a truer man or seen a more capable fighter.”

Copernum gave an amused sneer. “This from a displacer.”

Ferrin grinned. “It must sting to host me.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. Ferrin and Copernum had taken jabs at each other during the entire procession. Why were men so in love with bravado? Didn’t they get how pathetic it seemed? She glanced over her shoulder at the chancellor’s apartments. The opulent residence occupied a sizable portion of one of the tallest towers of the castle. She thought about how Jason had slept here one night, narrowly escaping an assassination attempt.

“Because you killed my cousin?” Copernum asked dryly. “You and I were adversaries back then. Ever since you joined the rebellion I have found you much more intriguing.”

Ferrin folded his arms. “I would have expected that my siding with Galloran would further diminish me in your eyes.”

“On the contrary,” Copernum insisted. “Don’t misinterpret my previous affiliation with the emperor. I courted his good opinion to benefit Trensicourt. My posturing with Felrook was political maneuvering on behalf of the kingdom I serve, nothing more. If Galloran can keep us equally safe with less demeaning methods, I will support him wholeheartedly.”

“You want me to believe that you’re glad I’m here?” Ferrin asked.

Copernum plucked a leaf from a vine and crumpled it in his palm. “I despise displacers as much as the next man. And I disliked you even before I learned what you were. I’m not appreciative that you murdered my relative.”

“Lester challenged me to the duel,” Ferrin reminded him. “I dispatched him in self-defense.”

“And then I had you decapitated,” Copernum said. “It suffices. Were the charges against you just? Perhaps not. Did I love my cousin? Not particularly. But your impudence toward him was an indirect insult to me. You received a sentence. It was carried out. Since you are a displacer, losing your head did not end your life. You wisely fled the city. Perhaps in the end I’ll be relieved that you survived. You are a resourceful person, Ferrin, and our cause will need capable allies in the coming months.”

“Galloran is entering the castle,” Rachel reported.

“Alongside his closest companions,” Copernum noted. “With a couple of exceptions.”

“I’m not sure we’re particularly close,” Ferrin replied.

Copernum cocked his head slightly. “No need to take it personally. Galloran shrewdly omitted you from his retinue. Drinlings and seedfolk add to his mystique. But you? All of Trensicourt will be gossiping about his mismatched eyes. Having a displacer in his company would only fuel further speculation about his loyalties. There are plenty of guardsmen in this town who would recognize you.”

“Why aren’t you down there with Dolan?” Ferrin wondered.

Copernum pulled his mantle more snugly about his narrow shoulders. “I do not crave public attention. There are circumstances when such appearances are necessary. Otherwise, I prefer to exert influence quietly.” Copernum turned to Rachel. “Why do you suppose Prince Galloran elected to keep you out of the procession?”

Rachel shrugged as if she didn’t care. Galloran had told her she would be safer and more comfortable in the castle. It had bothered her a little to be left out, but this was his kingdom, and she figured he knew best.

“I expect he wants to keep you shrouded in mystery,” Copernum answered. “Ostensibly for your protection. Mostly because you’re too young. He doesn’t feel you look the part—the abnormally gifted Edomic adept. Your wholesome appearance does not match the rumors currently circulating. To be honest, despite the whispers that had reached me, I had dismissed your worth myself until you put me on the floor.”

Rachel combed her fingers along her temple, tucking some hair back. “Whatever his reasons, I’m happy to do what Galloran wants.”

“Such flagrant loyalty,” Copernum murmured. “Would that I had so devoted a servant.”

“I trust him,” Rachel said.

“Evidently,” Copernum replied. His gaze strayed to Ferrin, then returned to Rachel. “Surely you realize that an adept of your talents needn’t take orders from anyone. At this point in history you’re invaluable, more precious than orantium. Utterly unique.”

“I try to help out,” Rachel said, the flattery making her self-conscious.

Copernum looked to Ferrin. “Is she truly so innocent?”

“She’s not weak,” Ferrin assured him. “Nor is she foolish. What are you playing at, Copernum?”

“Nothing,” he said, holding up his long hands. “I just wonder if Rachel appreciates that entire kingdoms would rally around a gift like hers. Maldor would trade all but Felrook to have her, either to slay her or to train her.”

“I think you’re exaggerating,” Rachel said, hoping the hotness in her cheeks was not visible as a blush.

“Which is why I label you innocent,” Copernum replied with a small bow. “The prince has entered the castle. Today accomplished everything he had hoped. The two of you should go greet your friends and celebrate.”

Ferrin inclined his head a fraction. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“At your service,” Copernum replied. “I should like to become better acquainted with both of you.”

Ferrin led Rachel away from the balcony and out of the luxurious residence. On the way down a stairway he leaned close to her. “What did you take from that?” he whispered.

“Be wary of Copernum,” she replied softly.

“Could you feel him cuddling up to us like a snake?” Ferrin asked. “Like a constrictor maneuvering for a deadly hold before the squeezing begins.”

“He tried to kill Jason,” Rachel said. “He tried to kill you. He tortured Nedwin for years. He’s only acting nice until he has another option.”

“Exactly right. He suspects we might be valuable. Did you notice how he tried to plant doubts and build trust? During such conversations, I like to imagine flattering words as a noose being tied round my neck. He gently tried to make you feel he appreciated your worth more than Galloran does. He tried to portray himself as a wise confidant. Nothing too drastic. He settled for patiently nudging our minds toward certain conclusions.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll never trust him.”

Ferrin walked beside her in silence for a moment. "Do you trust me?"  
"Not completely."  
"Good."

\* \* \*

Rachel didn't get to talk to Galloran on the day of his procession until the companions who had set out together from Mianamon gathered for a private evening meal in the royal chambers. After the parade Galloran had met with a variety of nobles, merchants, scholars, artists, and other influential members of society. Everyone seemed desperate for his attention, and he had patiently greeted the endless flood of well-wishers, giving each as much personal interaction as circumstances permitted.

Galloran had saved Rachel a seat immediately beside him. For the first time that day he put on his blindfold. "We can speak freely here," he said. "I won't chance spies reading your lips through my eyes."

"Did anyone ask about your eyes?" Nollin inquired.

"Not a soul," Galloran replied. "Everyone noticed. Nobody spoke of it. The lack of commentary suggests they assume I'm ashamed, which I probably should be."

"No reason to feel shame," Nedwin said. "You did what was necessary to stay in the fight."

"I'll address the matter after my coronation," Galloran said.

"The coronation will proceed on schedule?" Nollin asked.

"Day after tomorrow," Galloran replied. "Dolan has already announced my legitimacy. The grand duke will do the honors."

"This has been a long time coming," Nollin said. "How do you feel?"

"Like a stranger in my own home. Most of the people I once admired are gone. Many honorable men could once be found among the nobility of Trensicourt. Not so anymore. Those who remain are cautious and compromising at best, plotters and backstabbers at worst. But the kingdom will be mine, and with it a substantial host of soldiers, and that is what we most need at present."

"Good food," Io commented.

Rachel had been so attentive to the conversation that she had neglected to start eating. The table was burdened with crispy fowl, peppery venison, delicate fillets of trout, pots of soup, baskets of bread, platters of fruit, and trays of vegetables. A feast fit for a king, which Rachel supposed made sense under the circumstances.

"I'll agree," Ferrin said, spreading soft white cheese on a dark hunk of bread. "The road has its charms, but meals like this are scarce. The pleasure of city food prepared by experts nearly excuses the exhausting politics."

"You had it easy today, displacer," Kerick grunted. "The sun was hot during the procession, and the progress slow."

"At least you benefited from better company," Ferrin countered.

"Am I that boring?" Rachel complained.

"Not you," Ferrin clarified.

Galloran leaned toward Rachel. "I have meant to ask how you enjoyed the companionship of the acting chancellor."

Rachel swallowed a bite of bread. "Ferrin compared him to a snake."

Ferrin bobbed his head. "Copernum was everything you expected, Galloran. He has a definite fixation on Rachel."

"Unsurprising," Galloran replied. "His master has shown uncommon interest in her. I don't want Rachel ever left alone with him. Or anyone, really. Trensicourt is infested with treacherous manipulators. The sooner we're off to war the better."

"Agreed," Io seconded heartily.

"It's fine with me," Rachel inserted. "I'd much rather avoid guys like Copernum." She at least wanted the appearance of having some say in the matter.

"Will the more prominent schemers let you mount a war?" Nollin asked.

"I spent the day investigating attitudes on the subject," Galloran said. "Some won't want to make it easy. If I intended to wait a month to start a campaign, it might not be possible. But riding the current tide of high emotion, I expect to succeed. My most cunning enemies will rejoice to find Trensicourt mobilizing for war. The cleverest among them will gladly hurry me out of town. They will find many opportunities in having me away on a doomed offensive."

"How do you intend to counter them?" Nedwin asked.

"I'll do what I can," Galloran replied. "Who knows how the war will progress? Who can say how long it will last? Many options close to us if Trensicourt falls. I'll leave a trusted steward in command, along with a reliable aide or two. Apart from that I'll have to lay aside my concerns about the politics of Trensicourt for a season. According to the prophecy, an assault on Felrook is the key to dethroning Maldor. Until that goal is achieved, all other matters are secondary."

Looking around the table, Rachel wondered who Galloran might leave behind. Hopefully, none of the group who had set out together from Mianamon. She had already said good-bye to too many friends.

“I will grant you one thing,” Nollin said, wadding a napkin and tossing it aside. “You are not asking your allies to assume the greatest risk. Your present course will leave Trensicourt quite vulnerable.”

“This offensive is our last hope,” Galloran said. “I intend to pursue it with every resource I can muster. Sacrifices are inevitable.”

After Rachel finished her meal, she noticed Tark sitting alone at a small table away from the others. She went to him. “How did you enjoy the parade?”

“Not much,” he replied in his deep, raspy voice. “I would have been happier blowing a sousalax than trotting astride an overgrown pony. I disliked leaving you alone with Copernum and Ferrin, but it didn’t seem my place to protest.”

“Copernum wouldn’t have done anything to me with Galloran around,” Rachel said.

Tark lowered his voice. “Isn’t just Copernum I worry about.”

Rachel gave a small grin. “I’m not totally defenseless. I know a few tricks.”

“I’ve seen you knock people flat with a word,” Tark said. “And I saw you set the walking dead aflame. But I vowed to Lord Jason that I would protect you, and I mean to keep my oath. I did that duty poorly today.”

“Today was unusual,” Rachel said.

“Aye, and if I let unusual conditions stop me, I won’t be any help until this whole affair is over. I’m happy to admit that I’m in way over my head. I never expected to get involved with the high matters of great men. But I made two promises to Lord Jason: to help Galloran fight his war, and to watch over you.”

“You’ve done great so far,” Rachel assured him. “The war is on schedule and I’m doing fine.”

“Keep me near, if you can,” Tark urged. “I want to be of service.”

“I’m glad to know I can count on you,” Rachel replied, a hand on his arm.

Tark sniffed uncomfortably and looked away. “Now, don’t go relying on me too much. I’ll give you my best, but don’t forget to keep practicing that Edomic of yours.”

“Deal.”

\* \* \*

The coronation featured even more pageantry than the procession into the city. Simply to stand at the back of the throne room for the ceremony cost no less

than a hundred drooma.

Trensicourt had celebrated nonstop ever since the procession. For two days the streets had remained mobbed by revelers, regardless of the hour. Citizens thronged the plaza outside the castle to hear heralds recite the words spoken within.

Rachel sat in the throne room at the front of the elevated gallery. Tark was seated on one hand, Io on the other. Galloran had appointed the two men as her personal bodyguards for the duration of their stay at Trensicourt. Io looked handsome and dignified in his finery. Strange how much he had matured in half a year. Not just in appearance—his attitude had become more serious, although he remained very considerate. She tried not to think ahead to his hair going gray by winter.

While waiting for the ceremony to begin, Tark and Io kept stealing sidelong glances at her—as if she didn't already feel conspicuous enough! Yesterday Rachel had been fitted for a special outfit: a fine, dark robe with a veiled, broad-brimmed hat and black lace gloves. Nollin had come up with the idea. The goal was to make her appear mysterious, and the tailors had succeeded. The ensemble looked like an eccentric, stylish funeral outfit. Her attire attracted much attention, but at least the veil enabled her to avoid eye contact. When she turned her head toward the onlookers gazing her way, all eyes wandered elsewhere. Nobody wanted to get caught staring.

A hush fell over the room as a herald announced Galloran, complete with a dozen titles such as Protector of the Realm, High Commander of the Army, and Crown Prince of Trensicourt. Regal and tall, Galloran strode into the room, the train of his robe dragging behind like a cape designed for a giant. Three young attendants followed, holding the trailing ends of the purple garment.

Silence reigned as Galloran ascended the dais, shed his robe, and sat on a small, ornate chair before the Grand Duke of Edgemont, a husky man with a forked beard and costly attire. Dolan sat on the dais as well, as did Copernum and several other high lords of Trensicourt.

Rachel felt happy for Galloran. He looked very regal, and he had certainly earned this moment of glory.

Dolan arose and spoke to the assemblage. The speech struck Rachel as long-winded, as if he were trying to exhaust every possible way to express his joy at the return of the heir to the throne, all the while missing no opportunity to compliment the job he had done as regent in preserving the realm through the kingless years.



Next, Copernum stepped forward and spoke of his support for Galloran and his relief that the kingdom was whole again. Thankfully, his speech was shorter.

At last the Grand Duke of Edgemont issued a long ceremonial proclamation. Rachel was glad for the veil, because it allowed her to secretly yawn during the plodding recitation. Toward the end of the pronouncement a boy in a fancy doublet brought the crown to the Grand Duke of Edgemont on a silk pillow. Still reciting ceremonial words, the grand duke lifted the crown from the cushion, held it high, then deposited it on Galloran's head. A flourish of trumpets followed as Galloran accepted his royal scepter.

The Grand Duke of Edgemont retreated, and Galloran arose. The room erupted with cheers. Rachel hooted and hollered as loudly as anyone. The jubilation maintained a deafening volume for at least thirty seconds. Galloran raised both hands. As the applause subsided, Rachel could hear the sustained murmur of distant cheering from outside the castle. Word had traveled quickly.

"Fellow citizens of Trensicourt," Galloran began, raising his voice as best he could. A hush fell over the room. "I come to the throne more than a decade too late. Most of you are aware that I am no friend of the emperor, Maldor. I have spent the past years in active defiance of his ambition to dominate Lyrian. Some of those years were spent actively fighting him, some in the dungeons of Felrook, and the most recent years were spent gathering intelligence in preparation for a final stand against his bid for absolute power.

"The kingdoms taken by Maldor have fallen under the heavy yoke of his tyranny. His lust for dominion knows no bounds. As his power grows, he squeezes ever tighter, shrinking freedom and limiting opportunity. He rewards cowards and traitors willing to prosper by informing on friends and allies. He raises the cruel, the ruthless, and the treacherous to the highest offices. He limits the spread of knowledge to make his subjects ignorant and more docile. He will live for centuries. Left unchecked, his rule will usher in the darkest era in the long history of Lyrian. Civilization will continue to regress until most of the natural joy has been crushed from life. Those he rules will live in constant fear, mistrusting one another, unable to pursue excellence in any endeavor without risking his interference."

Galloran paused. The room was silent except for the low rustle of people shifting uncomfortably. Clearly, nobody had spoken this candidly about Maldor in Trensicourt for years.

"Contrary to what he would have us believe, the emperor has not yet captured the continent. Although he is well on his way, the kingdom of Kadara

continues to tie up the majority of his armed forces along the eastern coast as they lay siege to the cities of Kadara, Highport, and Inkala. The drinlings remain free, as do the Amar Kabal in the Seven Vales. And though we may have made some unwise compromises, Trensicourt also remains a free kingdom.”

Galloran paused again. Was he hoping for a reaction from the audience? Everyone was listening intently, but nobody cried out.

The freshly crowned king raised the fingertips of one hand to his temple. “There has been considerable speculation about my eyes. Yes, the spies of Maldor are watching as I gaze upon you. Maldor took my sight when I was captured. He offered to restore my vision by grafting in the eyes of displacers. The offer involved no pledges of fealty. I felt that I needed my sight to wage war against him, so I accepted his gift. This is why, when dealing in sensitive matters, I wear a blindfold. In combat I am happy to let Maldor watch me slay his servants.”

This earned a ripple of laughter that spread through the room and expanded into applause.

“A long road has taken me home to Trensicourt. I have seen much, learned much. My daughter, Corinne, the current heir to my throne, is living for the present in exile, alive and well.”

Enthusiastic cheers followed the announcement. Galloran waited for the furor to calm before continuing.

“I have been to the oracle of Mianamon. She has passed away, but she shared a final prophecy with me before she expired. She told me how Maldor can be defeated. There were many witnesses present. Starting tomorrow, Trensicourt will be aggressively at war with Felrook.”

Rachel did not think the room could have become quieter. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

“We will not stand alone. The drinlings will stand beside us. And after long years of neutrality, the Amar Kabal will be entering the fight.”

This announcement drew excited discussion rather than cheers. Galloran held up his hands.

“Naturally, I cannot share the specifics of our strategy. There will be other allies as well, including some who wield powers not seen in Lyrian for generations.” Rachel caught Tark looking over at her. When he noticed her attention, he hurriedly glanced away.

“We must begin preparations for war within the hour,” Galloran continued. “We will not wait to be besieged after Kadara falls. We will not bend our knees

to Felrook and fade timidly into an age of darkness and oppression. Instead, we will move faster than our foes will believe possible. We will march out in force and seize the last real opportunity to fight back. This will be the final chance to stop Maldor from overrunning the continent, and I mean to take it.” Emotion built to a climax in his voice. “The oracle has foreseen that we can triumph! I have fought the emperor for years from the shadows. Now, at last, we finally have the right allies and the right opportunity. The hour has arrived for me to lead us to victory in open battle!”

Here the crowd exploded with cheers. Rachel’s heart swelled with his stirring words. His defiant enthusiasm was contagious.

“Too long has Trensicourt watched and waited. Ours is a proud heritage of victory in warfare. We are just as brave and capable as those who preceded us. Braver. More capable. Rested and ready. Other kingdoms have wondered what has kept us out of the fray, much as we have all wondered why the Amar Kabal have not emerged from their strongholds to confront the greatest threat our peace and prosperity has known. We were waiting for the right moment, as were they. That moment is upon us. If we continue to wait, the opportunity will pass us by. Instead, we will strike alongside the same allies who overthrew Maldor’s master. The emperor will not steal our freedom. He will not control the lives of our wives, of our children, or of our unborn generations. We will not let him!”

Now the room thundered with approval. Rachel found herself wanting to rise to her feet. The power of his message touched her deeply, and most around her clearly felt likewise. There was determination and anger in the tumult. The nervous tension that had sustained the earlier silence was releasing. Rachel looked around. These people were hearing words that should have been spoken long ago. Words they might not have believed from anyone less than this storied figure, their exiled king, standing before them in glittering raiment, fortified with legendary prowess and cunning, his bold words spoken with certainty.

It took some time for Galloran’s raised hands to quiet the clamor. “Some may wonder why I share my intentions so openly. I mean to lead you honestly, as my father did before me. When we charge into battle, I will be at the front. Also, there will be no way to hide our preparations for war. The endeavor will be massive, and no matter what precautions we adopt to conceal our intentions, word of our efforts will reach the emperor. So why hide? He would not have had time to counter the attack I intend if I had warned him last month. He has planned like a commander confident that no further trouble awaits him. The

placement of his forces is sloppy and lopsided. We will capitalize on this mistake with blood and victory!”

Again the room went wild. Io and Tark were standing. Rachel felt herself being swept up in the excitement. The people believed, or at least wanted to believe.

“I will issue this warning once,” Galloran continued. “Any sympathizer of Maldor has this day only to get out of my kingdom. Starting tomorrow, any individual employed by him will be guilty of treason and sentenced to death. This includes all the minor governors and lawmakers in the outlying towns within the boundaries my father ruled. This includes any man or woman wearing an imperial uniform. Imperial servants are the enemies of this kingdom, and I authorize the citizens of Trensicourt to execute the sentence I have prescribed. Throw off your imperial yokes. We have larger battles to fight.”

Galloran waited again for the approval to subside.

“If any man would care to challenge my right to rule, or to call us to war, or to denounce the emperor, speak now and face me in combat.” Galloran gazed solemnly over the multitude, one hand on the hilt of his sword. Nobody stirred.

“Let the celebrations of the previous days suffice. Now is the hour to make ready for war. Lords, call your vassals. Summon your knights. Ready your soldiers. Heralds, take my words to the far reaches of our kingdom and beyond. Call the men of Lyrian to arms. Now is the hour to prepare, for our host will march before the week is out. As your king, I am honored to serve alongside you in this monumental cause. The future generations of Trensicourt will look back on this day with reverence. We stand at one of the great turning points of history. We must not fail! We will not!”

Galloran turned and left the dais, leaving the room in a state of enthusiastic pandemonium. Years of uncertainty and oppression had combined with the elation of their king’s return into a more fervent atmosphere than Rachel had expected. She realized that many of those present had been desperately hoping to hear words like Galloran had spoken. People around her who had seemed nervous minutes ago were clapping one another on the back, emboldened by the prospect of taking action behind a leader such as their new king. A minority in the crowd brooded, arms folded, expressions clouded, but even the most pensive onlookers tried to look positive as they were jostled by their neighbors.

Down on the dais Rachel noticed Copernum, eyes roving the assemblage from beneath his large, tricornered hat. He surveyed the scene calmly, as if gathering data. From across the wide space his sharp, calculating eyes found her,

seeming to penetrate her veil. His small frown bent into a faint smile, and with a swirl of his cloak he exited the room.

# HIJACKERS

Nia burst into the small bedroom. Jason jerked his head up and squinted at her, tense from being startled awake.

“Are we under attack?” he blurted.

She was smiling. “No, it’s good news! The *Valiant* has been spotted on the horizon.”

“About time,” Jason said, relaxing. The ship was three days behind schedule. Everyone had been getting really antsy. He blinked and wiped his eyes.

“Sorry to disturb you,” Nia said. “I thought you’d want to know.”

“I’m glad you told me.” The room had no window, so he lacked outside light to help him gauge the time. “Is it morning?”

“Not quite daybreak,” she said. “You can go back to sleep if you want. In fact, you probably should. Tonight is the night!” Nia exited, closing the door.

Jason sagged onto his side and closed his eyes, but he failed to sleep. Eventually he went and found some breakfast. There was a new energy among the drinlings. Concerns had been expressed that the *Valiant* might have been diverted because somebody had caught wind of the planned hijacking. Every day their strike force had remained in hiding had increased the chance for somebody to discover them. But now it looked like all would proceed as designed.

Jason stewed all morning and into the afternoon. He spent a lot of time on his feet—testing the weight of his new sword, aiming the crossbow Aram had given him, foraging for snacks, listening for news. Pacing. Fretting.

Tonight’s endeavor would be like nothing he had ever done. Hijacking a ship in the middle of the night? This was a big town, surrounded by high walls. The ship would be guarded. There would certainly be fighting. If he and his friends messed up, they would all die.

Nobody expected much of him. According to what Jason knew of the plan, he was basically cargo. After the ship was secure, Drake and two drinling escorts would hustle him aboard. But so much could go wrong. What if they ran across a stray patrol on the way to the ship? He would have to help them fight their way

clear. If an alarm was sounded before they boarded the ship, soldiers could come rushing to the waterfront, and he might end up in the thick of the battle.

Jason had practiced for months so that he could contribute in a fight. But since learning to use a sword, he had never confronted an opponent with his life on the line. That test might come tonight, meeting an enemy in combat, no blunted edges, no practice gear . . . no second chances. Skill would be involved, as would composure, as would luck. Either he or the opponent would survive. The prospect sent nervous thrills tingling through his body.

Jason knew he would not be fighting alone. Drake and others would probably be there to bail him out. But anything could happen. Worst-case scenarios could leave him alone in a sea of enemies. No matter how he tried to distract himself, he could not stop anticipating the possibilities.

Not long before sunset, somebody knocked on his door. Jason had his sword out, dueling imagined enemies. He hastily tossed it aside. "Come in."

Aram entered, still small, and glanced from Jason to the sword on his bed. "Restless?"

"Not too bad," Jason lied.

Aram smirked. "My room is directly below yours. I could hear you clomping around."

Jason was not one to blush, but the sudden warmth in his cheeks hinted that this might be an exception. He looked away from the undersized half giant. "I was just doing some exercises."

Aram plopped down on the edge of Jason's bed. "Truth be told, I'm a bit edgy myself."

"Yeah?"

"This is a major operation. With so many people involved, I can hardly believe we haven't given ourselves away already. These drinkings deserve a lot of credit. They have discipline."

"Think we can pull it off?"

Aram hesitated. "You know I used to work as a smuggler."

"Right."

"I've taken plenty of chances in my day. Risk was part of the job. But the risks were carefully measured. Thanks to my precautions, the chances of getting caught remained low. I stayed in situations where nine times out of ten, if I did get apprehended, I would be able to bargain my way out of serious trouble. Even among the officials appointed by Maldor, most consider smuggling necessary to some extent. The service fills a need. I was careful about where and when I

operated. I was careful about who I worked with. Careful about what goods I moved. Careful about who I bribed.”

Jason could see where Aram was headed. “And now we’re rushing into something crazy?”

Aram shook his head. “Not necessarily. Not overly crazy. This could work. How do I put this?” He stared down at his clasped hands. “During my career, I occasionally came across opportunities for a really bold mission. A job that might produce a mountain of money overnight or really enhance my reputation. A big score—a chance for glory, riches, or both. These types of jobs almost always involved harming the interests of the emperor in one way or another. Or else they had the potential to draw his attention.

“I created workable plans for several of those missions. I devised strategies that made the projects feasible, kept the risk within reason. But the price of failure in those instances was much too high, so I played it safe. I never implemented those plans. Chasing the big score gets greedy men killed.”

“But tonight . . .,” Jason prompted.

“Tonight we’re going to hijack an interceptor. Among other duties, it will be my responsibility to captain the ship. I have the most experience at sea, so the job fell to me. I’ve drilled the drinlings on procedures. They mastered their knots and lashings with shocking ease! They’re highly adaptable. Every man knows his role. But most have never sailed a ship like the *Valiant*. For good or ill, our success depends largely on me—whether I trained them right, whether I lead them effectively.

“I love the sea. I’ve captained before. I’ve dreamed of becoming shipmaster of an interceptor, Jason. There is no finer vessel afloat. The basic design came from the Kadarian warships, but Maldor perfected it. To captain the *Valiant* will be a thrilling privilege that I never expected to actually experience.”

“But you’re also nervous?” Jason guessed.

Aram shifted in his seat. “I’m discarding years of good judgment. Our actions tonight will publicly insult the emperor and all those in his service. Don’t get me wrong. I’ve been in tight spots before. Things have gone poorly, and I’ve fought my way free. But I never sought out such situations. This hijacking will have every imperial agent on the Inland Sea after us. It will draw the personal attention of the emperor.”

“Is the plan good?” Jason hoped.

“Superb. They won’t be expecting anything this bold. They couldn’t possibly anticipate the amount of manpower we’ve assembled. This hijacking is daring



enough to fall completely outside of their expectations. The *Valiant* made port today. Most of the crew will be carousing and enjoying the inns tonight. Those standing guard in the middle of the night will be disgruntled and careless. What could happen to an interceptor moored in a port firmly under imperial control? These soldiers haven't seen real action for years. In combat situations surprise means a lot, and it should be entirely on our side."

"So you're more worried about afterward."

"I'm worried about everything. Too much could go wrong. And if things go wrong, they will go very wrong. If our surprise is somehow foiled, this could end disastrously. If our enemy takes more clever or effective action than we've anticipated, we could be massacred. And even if we get away, it is only the beginning. We'll be sailing to an island nobody has survived, with every soldier in the region after us. Not a favorable scenario."

"Wow," Jason said, feeling he now had a better grasp of why he should be freaking out.

"This is the sort of scheme you devise as an idle fantasy, and then lay aside."

"But we can't lay it aside."

"If we're determined to get to Windbreak Island, this is probably the only way. No better alternative exists. The prophecy claims we have to get there. Greedy or not, we're being forced to pursue the big score. It goes against my instincts, which makes me edgy."

"I'm pretty wired too," Jason admitted. "I think I get what you mean. I've spent most of my time in Lyrian trying to avoid danger. Tonight we're charging straight into it."

Aram rubbed the sides of his nose with both hands, partially hiding his face. "Truth be told? My instincts keep telling me to run. And listening to my instincts has kept me alive so far."

"You think we should run?"

"Not all of us. I was speaking about myself."

Jason felt shocked by the admission. "You don't really want to ditch us?"

Aram gave a weak smile. "I definitely *want* to run. I've never liked sitting still. I almost took action yesterday, before the *Valiant* had been sighted."

"You almost left?" Jason gasped. "Really?"

"I wouldn't bring it up if I meant to actually do it."

"Then why bring it up at all?"

"I thought it might mean something for you to know that the thought of you helped keep me here."

“Me?” Jason asked.

“I had to ask myself how committed I was to this cause. I had to confront whether I was willing to go all the way, to venture into dangers from which I had little chance of returning. I knew Jasher and Drake wouldn’t give up. The mission would go forward without me, and I could picture my presence making little difference whether it succeeded or failed. But then I thought about you. I thought about a young man who didn’t belong to this world, who had managed to make a difference without many of the skills I might have supposed were necessary. And I realized that if a stranger like you held true, a man of Lyrian like myself had no right to depart.”

“Wow,” Jason said. He could hardly believe his actions had mattered so much to a warrior like Aram. “So you’re not leaving?”

“I’ll hold true.”

“Even though your instincts don’t like it?”

“Even so.” Aram stood up and crossed to the door. “I’ll be growing soon. Antsy or not, you should try to sleep. We won’t get underway until the stillest hour of the night.”

“Thanks for talking with me,” Jason said. “It helps to know I’m not the only person feeling anxious.”

“We should all be anxious! Maybe it will keep us sharp. This is a grim endeavor. We’ll need to be at our best tonight.”

Jason wondered what his best would look like. He hoped he would measure up. “I’ll give it everything I’ve got.”

“I believe it,” Aram replied. He glanced at the weapon on the bed. “Don’t wear out your sword arm.”

\* \* \*

Jason slept restlessly, tossing and turning, waking up at intervals. When Drake came for him, Jason was awake, staring silently at the darkness. He rolled out of bed as soon as the door opened.

“Did you sleep?” Drake asked.

“Sort of,” Jason replied. “I felt tense.”

“Hiding away like this for most of a week would make anyone edgy. I’ll be glad to get on the water. Been some time since I toured the Inland Sea.”

Jason buckled on his sword and grabbed his crossbow. “Where are the others?”

“Some are already moving into position,” Drake replied. “The idea is to reach the docks without looking like fifty people.”

A male and female drinling awaited outside his room. Jason had not learned all the names, but these two were called Thag and Zoo. Both looked to be in their twenties. Both spoke English without much confidence, but seemed to banter cheerily with their comrades in their native tongue. Zoo was slender for a drinling, but had a sinewy toughness. Thag’s hulking muscles were developed to the point where it seemed they would limit his movement.

Drake led Jason and the two drinlings down to the enclosed alleyway outside the secret rooms. Overhead, a rectangular section of black sky glittered with stars. The curly-haired barkeeper waited at the far end of the little courtyard beside a ladder that led up to a window. Jason climbed the ladder behind Drake and entered the inn. A few drinlings lingered in the common room.

“The other drinlings will follow behind us,” Drake said. “Most have gone ahead. Come.”

Shadowing Drake, Jason exited the front door and climbed the steps to the street. He kept his crossbow hidden under his cloak. Nobody had weapons visible. The street was silent.

“How late is it?” Jason whispered.

“Less than two hours until first light,” Drake replied. “The moon has set. We’re going directly to the *Valiant*.”

They advanced along the side of the road at a brisk walk. The drinlings had their hoods up. A calm breeze blew against Jason’s back.

“Wind from the southwest,” Drake mentioned. “Close to ideal.”

The road ended at the waterfront. The bulky shapes of sailing vessels loomed in the darkness, lit by stars and a dozen dockside lanterns. Other lamps shed light aboard a few of the ships. Fires danced along the top of the sea wall that stretched out into the harbor: torches and cressets. At the mouth of the harbor, where the two walls almost met, a pair of bonfires blazed, the flames reflecting off the dark water.

The largest ship by far was off to the right, a long vessel with three towering masts rigged with numerous sails. Four lanterns brightened the deck. Jason saw at least two soldiers patrolling.

Drake furrowed his brow. “We should have the ship by now.”

He led them back a block, then along a cross street. They carefully approached the dock again. They came out closer to the *Valiant*, the name of

the huge ship visible on the side. At the end of the next street over, a couple of inns remained brightly lit. Music could be heard from one of them.

Nia emerged from the shadows. "Come with me," she whispered.

"What's the problem?" Drake asked as she led them to a dark nook shielded by a low fence. They had a clear view of the *Valiant*.

"A patrol of six guards was roaming the docks," Nia said. "We had to wait until they moved beyond sight of the *Valiant*. We took them quietly."

"They'll be missed sooner or later," Drake warned. "Probably sooner."

"The plan is in motion." She nodded toward one of the lit inns. Aram came staggering out, wrapped in his huge leather cloak. He lumbered toward the *Valiant*. "More soldiers than we would prefer are still celebrating at the inns. They must sleep less than I do."

"This late, none of them should be terribly useful in combat," Drake murmured.

Jason watched Aram amble along the pier toward the *Valiant*. As he approached the ship, a soldier came to the top of the gangplank. "You there," the sentry called in a raised voice, "state your business."

Aram shouted his reply. "Some seamen at the Broken Barge were bragging about sailing aboard an interceptor. Never seen one up close." He started up the gangplank, swaying unsteadily.

"Now you've seen one," the soldier said. "I must ask you to come no closer."

Still walking, Aram waved a dismissive hand. "Don't spoil a beautiful night! I just want a peek."

"Turn around, sir. At once. This vessel is imperial property." Three other soldiers had joined the first one at the top of the gangplank.

Aram kept coming, taking his time as if the steepness of the gangplank were tiring him. "Don't be sour just because your mates are out having a good time. I wore your colors for a season, in service of the emperor. Never aboard a ship like this, mind you."

All four of the soldiers drew swords. "I'm in command here," a different soldier said, his voice stern. "If you wore our colors, you know our duty. You've been out too late, friend. You're not thinking right. Go on home. Don't make us remove you."

Aram was now three-quarters of the way up the gangplank. He stumbled and fell forward. After lying still for a moment, he rolled onto his side. "More comfortable than it looks," he said. "Maybe I'll take a breather."

“You will not,” the lead soldier said, sounding exasperated. “Get on your feet and shove off. Last warning.”

Aram let out a long moan. “I may have overdone it tonight, lads. Something I ate wants back out. I don’t think it means to come quietly.”

The lead soldier gestured for two of the others to approach Aram. They sheathed their swords and started down the gangway.

Aram began to sing, the words strained, halting, and somewhat off-key. “Old Ingrim was a man of the sea, the sort you’d hope to know. He’d buy you a drink if you shot him a wink, then tell you—”

Retching sounds interrupted his tune.

The two soldiers had reached Aram, but they paused, looking at each other. They spoke to Aram too quietly to be heard. Crouching, each grabbed an arm, grunting as they helped the huge man stand. Once they had Aram on his feet, they gazed up at him, clearly impressed by his size. One of them kept a hand on the hilt of his sword. The other kept a hand on Aram, steadying him.

“Don’t tell my wife about this,” Aram blustered. “The woman is hard enough to stomach when I mind my manners. Don’t send me home. I’d be safer in a nice cozy cell. Hear my advice, lads—if you’re ever tempted by marriage, get a dog instead. You’ll thank me.”

Aram took little wobbly steps without going anywhere, as if struggling to maintain his balance. He hunched, leaning from one side to the other, a hand on each of the soldiers for support. Then he doubled over, making retching sounds again.

Figures began to appear on the opposite side of the *Valiant* from the gangplank. They stealthily advanced on the soldiers from behind.

“This is disgraceful,” the lead soldier complained. “Walk him down to—”

His words were cut off as he was blindsided by attackers. The two soldiers at the top of the gangplank went down silently. Aram wrapped his powerful arms around one of the soldiers helping him, snapped his neck with a precise jerk, then swiftly did the same to the other man.

“Now,” Nia breathed. She led Drake, Jason, and the other drinkings out of hiding and toward the warship. One of the drinkings extinguished the dockside lantern nearest the *Valiant*. The night air smelled of brine and wet wood. As Jason reached the pier, he found that unless he stepped softly, his feet boomed too loudly against the planks.

Aram had hoisted the two soldiers on the gangplank over his shoulders and now carried them up to the deck. Presumably the splash would be too loud if he

simply tossed them in the water. Jason was impressed by Aram's performance. The distraction had fully occupied the soldiers while several drinlings had accessed the far side of the *Valiant* by rowboat and climbed up to the deck.

A drinling beside Jason carried Aram's heavy shirt of overlapping metal rings, the armor clinking as he ran. Jason followed the drinling up the gangway.

"To your places," Aram commanded in a loud whisper. "Do every task we rehearsed." He shed his heavy cloak, accepted the armored shirt from the drinling, and put it on. Drinlings swarmed into position, some grabbing lines, some climbing the masts. Aram began striding about, giving specific instructions. Jason took up his position beside Nia near the top of the gangplank.

"Dousing the lantern was the main signal," Nia murmured. "Our fighters should be advancing along the walls." She held a bow with an arrow nocked and ready, eyes scanning the docks.

Jason stared at the impressive walls that stretched from dry land out into the water of the harbor. By the light of the distant cressets along the top, he could not yet see any activity. A sudden clash of steel rang from below the deck. Then he heard a strangled cry from beyond the ship, off to the right in the darkness.

Jason didn't know all the details of the plan. Jasher, Aram, Nia, and an older drinling named Heg had been the architects—dividing up the teams, issuing assignments, and deciding how they would signal one another. Jason knew that Jasher was leading a group to sabotage some of the other craft in the harbor. A couple of small assault teams were supposed to charge along the walls, slaying sentries in order to stop the watchmen from closing the harbor mouth. The majority of the drinlings were working to secure the *Valiant* and get underway.

Crossbow ready, Jason watched the port. Every second that they went undetected increased the chances of their escape. Drake gripped Jason by the elbow and nodded off to the left. Flames were spreading across the deck of a large two-masted ship and leaping up into the sails. A moment later no fewer than five other fires started on five other ships, each moored to a different pier.

"Lantern oil," Drake murmured. "No other ship in port could possibly outpace an interceptor. But three might be able to chase us to Windbreak Island in time to cause trouble. Jasher wanted to torch a couple others for good measure."

Scattered drinlings began to converge on the pier alongside the *Valiant*—the raiders returning from the neighboring ships. A bell began to clang from the

mouth of the harbor. Other bells on the wall took up the call. The sentries had caught sight of the rapidly spreading fires.

Jason surveyed the dock, finger near the trigger of his crossbow. The incessant bells made him feel jumpy. No more operating in secrecy. Trouble was coming. The only question was how long it would take to arrive.

Drinlings raced up the gangplank, making it bow and bounce. Three drinlings paused on the pier beside the *Valiant* to spill a generous quantity of lantern oil. Torch in hand, Jasher came racing along the dock. He sprinted onto the pier, dropped the torch in the pool of lantern oil, and kept running as flames licked across the planks behind him.

“Cast off!” Aram bellowed. “Away we go!”

Jasher pounded up the gangplank and sprang aboard just as the *Valiant* drifted away from the pier. A moment later the gangplank dropped into the water. Ships burned on either side, a few of them already becoming infernos as the flames spread from sail to sail. Men poured out of the nearest inns. Several raced for the pier where the *Valiant* was departing. They were met with a volley of arrows from the near side of the warship. At least one man was hit. Several others dove for cover.

Aram personally dumped the four soldiers who had guarded the *Valiant* over the side, all the while shouting orders about their heading and the state of various sails. Jason could not decipher the specifics of the nautical jargon, but it all sounded very official.

Jason heard water sloshing. Peering over the side, he saw three huge oars helping to propel the *Valiant* toward the harbor mouth. He assumed there were three more on the opposite side.

“The sweeps don’t accomplish much for a vessel this large,” Drake commented. “But they offer a little hope if we get caught in a calm. And they can add a little speed in situations like these.”

“Nobody rows like the drinlings,” Jason said, remembering his voyage from Ebera to the Durnese River.

“We have some of the best oarsmen in Lyrian aboard,” Drake agreed. “The harder they row, the stronger they get.”

The big waterfront bell towers added their gonging clamor to the alarm. The *Valiant* was now away from the pier and heading for the gap between the breakwaters. The fire on the dock was dying out as men beat at it, but the burning ships were lighting up the night. On two of them the fire had climbed

to the highest sails, which meant that flames were stretching eighty feet into the sky, throwing fierce highlights onto the billowing smoke.

“We’re away,” Drake said calmly. “They can’t catch us from the docks. Their only chance is to block the harbor mouth. They have a pair of enormous winches on each side of the opening that can raise heavy chains to close off the gap.”

“Think our guys will stop them?” Jason asked.

Drake rubbed the back of his neck. “Our lives depend on it. Each drinling squad has a sledgehammer and a few flagons of lantern oil. They’ll try to smash and burn the winches into inoperability. They shouldn’t meet too much opposition. Nobody expected an attack tonight, least of all from inside the city. Their hardest chore might be to repel the reinforcements until we’re through.”

“Do they have an escape plan?” Jason queried.

“A risky one. Some of the drinlings used a skiff to board the *Valiant* while Aram distracted the guardsmen. Two drinlings were assigned to tie it to the stern with a long rope, so it will drag behind our ship. If the drinlings on the wall make it to the end of the breakwaters, and if we successfully slip through the gap, and if they’re still alive, they can dive in and swim for the skiff. Once out to sea and away from immediate danger, we can welcome them aboard. Any stragglers who miss the skiff will have to swim into open water and try to get away unaided.”

Jason peered anxiously ahead, trying to make out what was happening atop the sea walls. The hellish light of the blazing ships added to the illumination from the watch fires. Figures were running on the walls. The ship felt like it was advancing in slow motion. The breeze was weakening, and the oars could only do so much. Aram barked commands and occasionally climbed the rigging himself in the attempt to get the sails into the best possible position.

The bells continued to clang. Jason glimpsed fighting near the bonfire at the end of the left sea wall, silhouettes attacking one another. More combat became visible around the big bonfire on the opposite breakwater. A body fell from the wall. Jason hoped it was an enemy. After the fighting stopped, Jason could see figures attacking the great wooden winches, firelight glinting off the metal heads of sledgehammers. The left winch burst into flames, followed by the right.

Aram hollered the loudest, his rumbling voice audible over the panicky bells and the cheering of the other drinlings. Jason wondered if the drinlings on the wall could hear the gratitude. He wished the ship would sail faster. It was like riding a turtle during a jailbreak.



Back on the dock the fires were spreading. All the ships burned fiercely. A flaming mast had collapsed onto a pier, setting it ablaze. A second ship had ignited another pier. Whirlwinds of sparks spun up into the night above great sheets of flame. As a whole, the wild conflagration was beginning to look apocalyptic. If control was not soon gained over the fires, the entire waterfront would be lost.

The *Valiant* cruised toward the dark gap, oars sloshing, sails not slack but not bulging. Many guardsmen could be seen racing along the sea wall, best visible as they passed torches or cressets, sprinting toward the gap where the winches now blazed. The guardsmen moved faster than the ship, but they had more distance to cover.

The wind rose enough to fan the flames on the dock and fill the sails. Masts creaking, the ship accelerated in response.

The gap drew nearer. Jason tried to will the wind to push harder. As the ship approached, he gauged that the opening between the sea walls was probably eight or nine times wider than the *Valiant*. Standing on the deck, Jason was still a good fifteen feet lower than the walls. The closer the ship drew to the sea walls, the harder it became to see the activity up top. Jason gazed ahead at the darkness of the open sea.

“We’re through,” Drake said as the front of the ship nosed into the gap. “Too late to raise a barricade now.”

Relieved, Jason directed his attention to the unseen drinlings on the wall. He could hear blades clashing. Would any of them make it? He looked up at the breakwater as they sailed past, alternately glancing from one side to the other. The ship was nearly halfway through the gap before he saw three figures dive off the wall to the right. Moments later a pair dove from the wall on the left. Knowing there should have been five drinlings on each wall, Jason kept watching for other survivors.

“Down!” Drake shouted, tackling Jason to the deck.

For a moment the brusque action startled and bewildered him. Then arrows began thunking against the ship, a few at a time. A drinling plummeted at least thirty feet from the rigging, an arrow in his ribs. Jason grimaced as the body struck the deck with finality. Bearing shields, Thag and Zoo stood over Jason and Drake. As several drinling archers launched arrows of their own, Drake dragged Jason to a hatch and clambered down with him.

“I shouldn’t have left you exposed like that,” Drake apologized. “Very sloppy.”

"I'm all right," he panted.

Drake shook his head. "We were target practice. They had a deadly angle on us. I was too fixated on making it out of the harbor. I should have taken us belowdecks from the start."

"Think any of the drinlings from the wall will make it?" Jason asked.

"Depends how far back the skiff is trailing. If it was me, I would have jumped earlier. Soon as the front of the ship reached the harbor mouth, we were free."

"They might have been stuck fighting," Jason said.

"They did us a brave service," Drake replied. "Without them I doubt we would have gotten away."

"All clear," Zoo called down from outside the hatch.

Jason and Drake returned to the deck and looked back at the sea wall of Durna. The bells rang more quietly. The winches still burned beside the watch fires. In the background, flames raged along the dock.

"Anybody make it to the skiff from the wall?" Drake asked.

Thag held up three fingers.

Drake nodded and led Jason to the front of the ship, where Nia stood with a shuttered lantern. The blackness of the Inland Sea stretched out before them, with only the stars to show where the water ended and the sky began. Jason felt unsteady, drained after the stress and excitement of their narrow escape. It had all been so frantic. People on both sides had lost their lives. He hardly knew how to handle the sudden, dark calm. He felt bad for the drinlings who had fallen, but thrilled that the daring hijacking had succeeded.

Nia opened the shutter twice for a few seconds each time, then twice quickly. A moment later four quick flashes answered from farther out to sea, just right of their current heading.

"See that?" Nia called.

"I saw!" Aram answered. He shouted steering instructions.

"Corinne and Farfalee?" Jason asked.

"Together with Bat and Ux," Nia replied. "Four flashes means they're all there." She grinned at Drake. "We pulled it off."

"Your people were spectacular," Drake said.

"We lost some on the wall, and Gaw was killed on our way through the harbor mouth. Any lost life is tragic, but our losses could have been worse. Should have been worse."

"They were as surprised as we had hoped," Drake said. "Several ships will be totally lost. It will take months to repair the piers. News of this hijacking will

shake up more than this region. An interceptor is a serious prize, and we torched their waterfront as well. Many across Lyrian will hear the tale. Word of this victory should help Galloran as he recruits for his revolt. Tonight the empire looks vulnerable.”

Jason hadn't stopped to consider how the hijacking might bring hope to Maldor's enemies. Drake was right. Any bully looks less tough after somebody stands up to them. Jason tried not to dwell on the drinling who had fallen to the deck or the warriors who had died on the wall. Tonight was a big victory, a major step toward fulfilling the prophecy. Maybe they could actually pull it off!

“Maldor will demand vengeance,” Nia said. “He'll want to make an example of us.”

“We'll have his full attention going forward,” Drake agreed. “It was the price we paid for transportation to the island. With imperial troops behind us, and the Maumet before us, I have a hard time imagining how the oracle saw any of us surviving to seek out Darian the Seer.”

“Don't write us off yet,” Jason said, feeling emboldened by their success. “We have a fast ship and lots of good fighters. We'll find a way to finish the mission.”

“Such reckless optimism,” Drake said dryly.

Jasher came up behind them. “We have another advantage. The emperor can't be certain where we're going. Even if he confirmed our identities, our destination would be difficult to guess. The Inland Sea is large. We will not be easy quarry.”

“The oracle saw a way for us to survive,” Jason added. “We just have to find it.”

# A PROPOSAL

On a gray afternoon, Rachel roamed the woods, unsettled because everything felt much too familiar. The moss on the towering trees looked dark beneath the overcast sky. Rain drizzled down, just enough to dampen her. Up ahead a small decorative bridge spanned a little stream. She knew that on the far side her name was carved on a beige post, inside a heart.

Rachel approached the little bridge in bewilderment and traced her fingers over the engraved letters: *R-A-C-H-E-L*. This bridge was on the property her family owned. This forest was part of her backyard.

Glancing behind, Rachel observed ranks of thriving trees. What had she expected to see? She scowled pensively. Should she be here? How had she gotten here? Had she set out from her house to wander the woods and think? That felt wrong. But where else could she have come from? The memory almost came into focus, then dissipated.

She could not see her house up ahead, but Rachel knew it stood just beyond the top of the rise through the trees, along with three additional buildings that her parents frequently loaned to artists. At first they had made the spaces available to select friends. Then friends of friends. Eventually they had needed to make a reservation list. Painters, writers, sculptors. Occasionally musicians.

Why did the thought of home spark an urgent longing? Rachel wanted to run. Ignoring the silly impulse, she strolled up the hill, basking in the familiar sights and smells. She felt lucky to live in such a beautiful place.

The house had lights on in defiance of the gray day. Was it getting darker? Rain still sprinkled down. Rachel climbed the steps to the wide, rustic deck. She found the rear sliding door locked. She went around to the front door and found it locked as well. Shouldn't she have a key? She checked her pockets. Nope.

Walking away from the door, Rachel peered through a living room window. There were her parents, comfy in their favorite chairs, each with a book, steaming mugs nearby. The sight of them made her heart swell with relief and joy.

Rachel rapped on the window, but it made hardly any sound. She knocked harder, but it was like banging on a huge slab of stone rather than a fragile windowpane. “Dad!” she shouted. “Mom! I can’t get in!” All they had to do was look up and see her at the window. They didn’t.

Frustrated, Rachel hurried to the front door and knocked heavily. Again there was no sound. She tried the doorbell. Normally, she should have heard it chime even from outside. She heard nothing. What was going on?

She looked down at the fancy welcome mat, a gift from a visiting artist. THE WOODRUFFS, it read in flowery script. Clusters of costume jewels added sparkle in two corners. The artist had insisted that they actually use the mat. Rachel frowned. The mat seemed to taunt her by proclaiming that this was her home. If that was true, why couldn’t she get in?

Rachel circled the house. She slapped random windows after checking to see if they were unlocked. None were. No matter how hard she pummeled the glass, she could produce no noise. She looped back to the window where she could see her parents calmly reading. Dad was sipping from his mug. Mom turned a page.

Rachel pounded the glass with both fists, to no avail. She waved her arms and shouted. She backed up, picked up a stone the size of her fist, and hurled it at the window. The stone bounced off, making no noise until it struck the ground. What had her parents done to the house? Made it soundproof and bulletproof?

Desperate, Rachel picked up another rock.

“Can I help you?” asked a female voice from behind.

Rachel whirled and saw Sharmaine, her favorite artist who had ever resided with them. When had she come back? Sharmaine had short pink hair and dark eyeliner. She wore a denim jacket covered with pins, beads, and ink doodles.

Sharmaine had grown up in Michigan. She painted pieces of wood and then wrote original haikus on them in fancy calligraphy. She had given Rachel a painted wooden segment that read:

*When Rachel pole vaults  
She soars like a swift pirate  
With a huge peg leg*

The plank had a doodle of a pirate beside the haiku. It was one of Rachel’s favorite treasures.

“Hi, Sharmaine,” Rachel said. “I was trying to get their attention.”

“Rock through the window would do it,” Sharmaine replied curtly. She wasn’t showing any recognition. If anything, she seemed wary.

Rachel glanced at the rock in her hand. “They couldn’t hear me.”

Sharmaine gave a cautious nod. “Let’s try the front door.”

Rachel almost protested, but decided against it. She followed Sharmaine to the front door. “You remember me, right?” Rachel checked.

“Sure,” Sharmaine said vaguely. She knocked on the door. It made a sound! A normal knocking sound, just how it should.

A moment later her dad answered. “Hi, Sharmaine. Who’s your friend?” He was looking at Rachel with blank courtesy.

She had seen her father show that expression to other people. But never her. He knew her. He loved her.

“It’s me,” Rachel said meekly.

“Have we met?” he asked, still with the neutral politeness appropriate for a new acquaintance.

“I’m your daughter,” Rachel said, insulted that she had to spell it out.

Her dad looked to Sharmaine, who shrugged. “I found her outside your window holding a rock.”

Dad returned his gaze patiently to Rachel. “Our only daughter died years ago,” he explained. “Did you know her?”

Rachel suddenly realized that she had been away in Lyrian for a long time. It all came rushing back. She must look older or different. “It’s me, Dad. I’m just older. I’m back.” Tears welled in her eyes.

Her dad glanced at Sharmaine. The glance communicated that they clearly had a situation on their hands.

“I’m not crazy,” Rachel blurted, wiping at her eyes. “Ask me anything; I can prove it.”

“Where do you live?” he asked gently.

“Here,” Rachel answered in a small voice. “I live here.”

“Why don’t you come inside and sit down?” her dad offered, as he would to a needy stranger.

Rachel turned to Sharmaine. “You remember me, right? You gave me the haiku? About the pole vaulting?”

Sharmaine held out a painted plank. “If you want a haiku, I can spare this one.” Rachel accepted the wooden rectangle. Sharmaine looked at Rachel’s dad. “You okay?”

“I’ve got this,” he replied. “Thanks, Sharmaine.”

Sharmaine turned away, and Rachel followed her dad inside. He escorted Rachel to the living room and offered her a seat on the sofa. Her mom was no longer present.

“Make yourself comfortable,” her dad said. “I’ll be back in a second.”

Rachel took a seat, the painted plank in her hands. Turning it over, she saw little gravestones doodled at either side of a haiku.

*Most loving parents  
Try to dodge conversations  
With their dead children*

The words struck Rachel like a physical blow. Fearful chills made her skin prickle. What was going on?

She stood up, surveying the familiar room. The correct pictures hung on the walls. The correct knickknacks rested on the mantel. The scent of herbal tea wafted up from half-empty mugs.

“Rachel?”

Startled, Rachel spun to face her mother, who had just entered the room. “Mom?”

Her mom cocked her head sympathetically. “No, dear, I’m not your mother.”

Exasperated, Rachel pointed to a nearby picture of the three of them. “Look at the picture, Mom. Does the girl in it look familiar?”

“She was our daughter,” her mom sighed serenely. “You’re not her, dear.”

“I am her, Mom. What’s the problem? Do I look that different? Ask me anything.”

Rachel’s mom looked her straight in the eye, her expression becoming stern. “You are not our daughter. Our little girl has vanished forever. It’s time you confront the truth. Merrill and I have moved on. You should as well.”

Rachel suddenly recognized that her mom’s eyes were completely black. Thinking back, she seemed to recall that her dad’s were black too, and Sharmaine’s as well, although she had failed to notice at the time.

“You’re not my mom,” Rachel whispered.

The woman smiled. “That’s right. Now you’re getting it. Somebody here has been looking for you.”

Maldor stepped around the corner into the living room. Rachel had never seen him, but she knew his identity as surely as she knew that she must be dreaming.

"I'll leave you two to talk things over," her dream mom said, stepping out of the room.

Rachel faced Maldor, glaring into his black eyes. "This is a dream."

"We need to talk."

Rachel stared at him. "It feels real. I feel awake. Is that really you?"

"As close as we can manage at present. Have a seat."

"I'll stay standing."

"No need for hostility. I'm here as a courtesy."

The statement made Rachel furious. "Get out of my house! Get out of my mind! You weren't invited! You don't belong here!"

Maldor held up his hands soothingly. "Don't lose your temper. I'll leave soon. First, we must talk. Your friends are going to die, Rachel. All of them. Soon. Unless you save them. I just wanted to give you that chance."

Concern for her friends warred against her rage at the mental intrusion. After a moment, Rachel bridled her anger enough to respond rationally. "You're not here to help them. Or me. You're here to mess with my mind. How do I get rid of you?"

"Don't be so hasty," Maldor warned. "This illusion took considerable time and effort to establish. You should hear my proposal."

Rachel took a deep breath. What if she attacked him? What if she used Edomic to set the sofa on fire and hurl it at him?

"You can't hurt me here," Maldor said. "I can make this much less pleasant, if you wish."

"Don't read my thoughts," Rachel snapped.

"They're hard to miss," Maldor apologized. "After all, this is your mind."

"Doesn't feel like it."

"I imagine not. You have so little control. I could teach you to lock out incursions such as this."

Rachel frowned. "That's a class I might sign up for."

"Shall we talk?" Maldor said, sitting down. "Tark or Io could get badly hurt if this takes too long. The more quickly we converse, the safer they'll be."

"Fine. All right." Rachel sat down on the sofa. She had never felt so conscious in a dream before. So alert and lucid. It seemed no different from full consciousness.

"Where did Jason go?" Maldor inquired.

Rachel felt panic. She tried not to think about him.



“Windbreak Island? Interesting. That explains much. I don’t see how he’ll survive. What guidance did you receive at Mianamon?”

“Get out of here!” Rachel yelled.

Maldor snapped his fingers. The sofa folded up around her, trapping her in a cushioned embrace. She remained in a seated position, cocooned from her ankles to her mouth. She could only manage muffled protests. She tried to will the sofa to release her, but it refused to budge.

“Hmmm,” Maldor mused. “Fascinating prophecy. I suppose there must be some minuscule chance for his survival. This is very useful information, by the way. Do you think your quests could possibly work? An attack on Felrook would be suicide for all involved. If I permit you to speak, will you be civil? Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

Angry and frustrated, Rachel blinked once.

The cushions unfolded from her mouth. “We’ll beat you.”

Maldor laughed. “She glimpsed one way, Rachel. The oracle glimpsed a single unlikely chain of coincidences that could stop me amid countless ways to fail. She neglected to offer many specifics. Now that I know what you are trying to do, it will be that much easier to stop you. Thank you, Rachel, for this priceless intelligence.”

Rachel squirmed. The sofa held her fast. She wanted to shout with frustration. Hot tears threatened.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Maldor urged. “I could have acquired this knowledge by a hundred different methods. Not that it matters. The oracle set you on a path that will require more than a miracle. It will require a prolonged series of miracles. Darian the Pyromancer is dead, Rachel. He has been dead for eons. Which Jason and his comrades will never learn, because they will perish at Windbreak Island. I won’t need to twitch a finger. The Maumet will see to their fate. And Galloran will undoubtedly die leading his foolhardy siege. There is no question.”

Maldor leaned forward. He spoke softly. “That prophecy is one of the nicest gifts anyone has ever given me. It brings me considerable peace of mind. I had worried that it might be dangerous. According to the oracle, somewhere in the future awaits some remote possibility of me coming to harm. I’ll be sure to defend against that implausible eventuality. Thanks to the prophetess, I now know where to focus my efforts.”

Maldor snapped his fingers, as if concerned Rachel’s attention might be straying. “Look at the situation with a practical eye. The prophecy will put all of

my most capable enemies into extremely vulnerable positions years before I could have managed it on my own. I will win my war twenty years earlier than expected, all thanks to the dying words of a withered schemer.”

Rachel had no response. She wanted to weep. She wanted to scream.

“You’re concerned about your friends,” Maldor said tenderly. “I’m here to make an offer. I’ve thought about you in the months since you escaped my servants at the Last Inn. With the passage of time, I’ve grown increasingly certain that I wish to train you.”

“Never,” Rachel gasped.

Maldor smiled. “Don’t be so quick to deny me. At least hear the proposal, so you can understand who your refusal will be killing. Look at this through my eyes. Soon I will have subdued all of Lyrian. There will always be decisions to make, a vast empire to manage. Much of that will become tedium, and most of it can be handled by underlings. Once Lyrian is conquered, I can see myself regretting not having an adept like you to train. Edomic talent tends to be hereditary. So many gifted bloodlines have failed that you may represent my last opportunity to pass my knowledge forward to a worthy apprentice.”

“I don’t want it,” Rachel said.

“No need to play games. No need for posturing. No need to act brave or defiant. We’re alone here. You may not want to employ Edomic in all the same ways I use it, but you crave the knowledge. You’ve been working hard to attain greater knowledge ever since you discovered your talent. I can feel how you relish the power, how you exult in it. I can feel how you yearn to gain enough mastery to destroy me. I will install means to prevent you, but you’re resourceful. In time you may find a way to thwart my precautions and overthrow me. You’ll certainly have a better chance than any of your comrades.”

Rachel closed her eyes. She tried to wall her thoughts away from him, to close her intellect to his scrutiny.

“We’re in here together,” Maldor chuckled. “It’s too late to deny me admittance. Listen to my offer, and I will depart. I want you to come to me voluntarily. If you do, I will grant absolute, unconditional mercy to ten of your friends. Any you choose to name. Jason, Galloran, Corinne, even Ferrin. All are eligible. Not only will I spare them, but I will ensure that they live out their days in peace and comfort. If Jason so desires, I will even send him back to the Beyond. Perhaps he will have the good sense to stay put this time. Do not respond now. Mull it over, take a few days—weeks, even—without my presence to distract you. Think hard. You cannot imagine all you will learn, all you will

achieve, all you will become. Most would offer me anything for this chance. I extend the opportunity to you freely, with generous promises attached. Respond by coming to me. Or by not coming to me. The choice is yours.”

Maldor stood. The sofa unfurled back to its normal shape. Maldor looked around. “You had a pleasant home. I can see the appeal. But your parents have moved on. So should you. Farewell, until we meet again.”

Maldor walked out of the room.

Rachel’s dream mom entered with a tray of cookies. Rachel eyed her numbly. Her dream mom set the tray in front of Rachel on the coffee table. “There we go. Peanut butter, your favorite.”

“You’re not my mom,” Rachel said.

The black eyes betrayed no emotion. “Of course not. Have a cookie.”

“I want to wake up.”

Her dream mom was walking out of the room. “Then have a cookie.”

Rachel was left alone. She selected a peanut butter cookie and held it up. The texture was as she remembered. It was still slightly warm from the oven. She sniffed it suspiciously. The cookie smelled delicious.

She took a bite. Just as the flavor started to hit her tongue, Rachel opened her eyes. She was in her room at Trensicourt, on her wide, soft bed. It had not felt like waking up. Not a bit. Her mind felt equally conscious as when she had sniffed the cookie. There had been no transition. Her eyes had been closed. Now they were open.

By the moonlight spilling through the window, Rachel could see a pair of lurkers beside her bed, like human shadows made three-dimensional. Reflecting none of the silvery glow, the figures were easily the darkest shade of black in the room, the kind of darkness found only in the most obscure reaches of space, beyond all starlight.

Her first impulse was to scream. But Tark and Io were in the next room. If she cried out, they would run in, attack the lurkers, and die. Clenching her teeth, she held the scream inside.

The lurkers were here. They had been here for some time, all during her dream, at least. As far as she understood, they would show no aggression unless provoked. She thought about her charm necklace, the one that helped keep lurkers out of her mind. It was packed away. Lurkers weren’t supposed to be a threat in a city.

She stared at the motionless duo. Jason had told her that standing up to his lurker had helped. She should show no fear. Maybe she could learn something

about them. Her hands were clenched into fists, her nails biting into her palms. She tried to calm herself and focus her thoughts.

*Why did you invade my dreams?* Rachel asked with her mind.

The lurkers remained perfectly still. *We are messengers*, the lurker on the right replied.

It was a relief to perceive a coherent response. It made them seem less alien. *I thought you never came into cities*, Rachel conveyed.

*Very seldom*, the lurker responded.

*Maldor insisted*, Rachel guessed.

*We could not refuse.*

Rachel furrowed her brow. *Was that really Maldor in my dream? Or just you?*

*Him through us*, the lurker replied. *We can reach one another.* Even without elaboration, she clearly understood that it referred to the other lurkers. They could keep in mental contact regardless of distance. *He was near one of us.*

Rachel remembered conversations with Jason and the charm woman. If she wanted to know where these creatures originated, who better to ask? *Are you like me? Are you Beyonders?*

*We are Beyonders. We are not like you.*

*You're from a different Beyond. Maldor controls you?*

*Within limits, by treaty.*

*Why come to me in a dream? Why not communicate like this? Why show me my house and my parents? Why torture me?*

*We do not belong in these forms. A dream is more natural to us.*

*Dreams are more like the place you come from?* Rachel guessed.

*More than the rest of this.* She could feel its disdain.

*Are you trying to get away? Rachel asked. Are you prisoners? Are you trying to escape and get home? Is he controlling you?*

The other lurker entered the conversation for the first time, the second mind recognizably different. *So many questions. Not your concern. Our assignment is complete.*

The two lurkers darted across the room and sprang from the window. It was a long drop, but Rachel knew it would be no problem for the torivors. She had seen a torivor leap from the wall of a high ravine and land lightly.

The sudden absence of the torivors was almost more unsettling than their presence. Lurkers had invaded her mind, her dreams. Maldor had just spoken to her. He had spied on her thoughts, her home, her secrets. He had learned the prophecy. And he had made her an offer.

Why hadn't she worn the charm necklace? Why had she assumed she didn't need it while at Trensicourt?

Another question loomed, more terrible than all the others. Rachel tried to ignore it, but the sickening concern was inescapable. She wished she could bury the thought, keep it secret, even from herself. Maldor had emphasized that only one path would lead to his destruction, while billions would lead to his triumph. After learning the prophecy, he would be more prepared than ever to stop them. Rachel shivered. What if, by leaving her mind open to him tonight, she had already ruined the possibility of anyone defeating him?

# AVENGER

It's an interceptor," Aram said, lowering the spyglass and passing it to Jasher. Aram was short again, his voice pitched higher than at night. More than two days out from Durna, Jason, Nia, Jasher, and Aram huddled together at one side of the *Valiant*. Minutes before, a drinling high on the mainmast had spotted a ship on the eastern horizon.

"It's on a course to intercept us," Jasher said. "Of all the foul luck!"

"Don't scold luck," Aram said. "Word of the debacle in Durna must have traveled more swiftly than we imagined."

"Maybe from displacer to displacer," Jason guessed.

Aram grunted. "By displacer or eagle or gossiping fishwives, the word is out, and imperial vessels are checking the sea lanes away from Durna."

"There are only two other interceptors in the whole Inland Sea!" Nia complained. "What are the chances?"

"Does it matter?" Aram replied. "One has found us. How do we respond?"

"How we deal with the interceptor is most vital in the short term," Drake agreed, approaching the group alongside Farfalee. "How they found us so quickly may matter more as time goes by."

"We razed their waterfront," Aram said. "They started looking hard. They found us."

"Too quickly," Drake said.

"Weren't you the one predicting disaster?" Nia asked Drake.

"Only because I hate being wrong," Drake replied. "Personally, I would much rather beat the odds and live. I expected travail, but not such early detection."

"I haven't let my eagles fly since the day before our rendezvous," Farfalee reminded everyone.

"Could our foes have anticipated our destination?" Jasher asked. "Doesn't seem likely. Sailors have avoided the sight of Windbreak Island for generations. Who could have leaked our intentions?"

“Impossible to guess,” Drake said. “But whatever we do about our visible pursuers, we should be braced for more. Our enemies must have uncovered our plans. In situations like this, I’m slow to credit coincidence.”

“What do you suggest?” Farfalee asked Aram.

“The wind is from the southeast. It will benefit both ships. Given our current positions, I expect we could evade the other interceptor and win a race to Windbreak Island. But the other ship will never lose sight of us. We’ll be trapped between the abominable guardian and the oncoming interceptor.”

“What if we engage them?” Jasher asked.

“You’re familiar with our armaments,” Aram said. He was referring to the miniature catapults—three on each side—poised to launch burning pitch. “The enemy ship will be similarly equipped. Most likely we would roast each other, which would serve the emperor fine.”

Jason winced. The prospect of combat aboard flaming ships with no land in sight was not appealing.

“We don’t just need to survive this,” Drake muttered. “We need to make it through virtually unscathed, or the rest of our efforts will be hobbled.”

“What about our orantium?” Jason asked.

“It’s our biggest advantage,” Farfalee agreed.

Jasher scowled in thought. “The problem becomes how to get close enough to deliver the explosives without taking fire ourselves.”

“Would the catapults fling orantium farther than pitch?” Jason wondered.

Drake shook his head. “Probably not much farther.”

“What if we moved a catapult to the bow and went straight at them?” Farfalee asked.

Aram shrugged. “Unconventional. Might catch them off guard. We might get off a few spheres before they could adjust. Once they adjusted, the maneuver would swiftly bring us into close range.”

“Orantium impacting the deck of the other ship would cause damage,” Jasher said. “But orantium against the hull near the waterline would sink them.”

Aram chuckled. “That would require quite a shot.”

“We want to hit them before they can hit us,” Nia said. “And it would be best to strike the hull near the waterline. Would losing some dead weight help us sail faster?”

“Only a little,” Aram said.

“We should run, but let them get close,” Nia replied. “I have a plan.”

\* \* \*

Jason stood at the stern beside Farfalee, watching the interceptor gradually gaining on them, sails billowing in the breeze. The sun would set before long.

"They don't seem to suspect anything," Jason said. "They're trailing straight behind us."

"They assume we're incompetent sailors," Farfalee replied. "Getting directly between us and the breeze gives them a chance to steal wind from our sails and gain even more quickly. Aram is deliberately doing nothing to counter the tactic. And he doesn't have us rigged for maximum efficiency."

"How is Corinne?"

Farfalee shook her head sadly. "Green as ever. I had hoped that the larger vessel and calmer water would reduce her stomach problems. Not so."

Jason nodded. Journeying southward last year, Corinne had been seasick all the way from the Silver River to the Durnese River aboard a drinling longship. Not an hour after coming aboard the *Valiant*, she had fallen ill again. She was currently in a cabin belowdecks. When Jason had visited, she had been flat on the floor, perspiring and moaning, a bucket at her side. He hadn't stayed long.

Behind the *Valiant* and off to one side, a school of kitefish leaped from the water, more than a dozen in total. They looked like a cross between barracuda and manta rays, long bodies sporting wide, winglike fins. The kitefish sprang into the wind, triangular fins spread wide, gliding smoothly upward, then hanging suspended before plunging back into the water.

With nets and rods, several of the drinlings worked round the clock catching kitefish and other sea life. Drake had explained that because of the high salt content, only select species of fish could survive in the Inland Sea.

"Would kitefish attack people?" Jason asked. They looked large enough.

"They mostly prey on other fish and birds," Farfalee answered.

"You don't have anything like them in the ocean?"

"Not really."

"I wonder where they came from," Jason said. "If the Inland Sea is too salty for most fish, how did they get here in the first place?"

"Wizards," Farfalee answered. "Anciently, this sea was lifeless. Using Edomic, wizards engineered fish that could withstand the intense salinity. Several species of bioluminescent seaweed, as well. The introduction of fish to the Inland Sea allowed for settlements to develop. Without the tampering of ancient wizards, there would be little life or industry here today."

"It must have been hard for the wizards to create new life," Jason said. "Rachel told me that living things resist Edomic."



“Which is why very few wizards ever produced even simple life-forms. Only the most learned and powerful could engineer life, and only four or five ever managed to spawn what we would consider intelligent life.”

“Can Maldor do it?” Jason wondered.

“If so, we have seen little evidence. His supporters are culled from preexisting races. It required some skill to evolve a botched race into the manglers, but it was adaptation, not true creation. Maldor is both powerful and talented, but probably not yet skilled enough to truly produce his own life-forms.”

“You knew some of the great wizards of Lyrian,” Jason said. “Like Eldrin.”

“I was not close to Eldrin,” Farfalee clarified. “But in my youth I spent some time in his presence. He was not a particularly kind man. He struck me as brilliant but abrupt, much more interested in his own plans and goals than in the people around him. All of his intelligent races have reason to dislike him. After all, at the same time he brought the Amar Kabal into being, he also designed our eventual extinction.”

“He made it harder to have kids over time,” Jason recalled.

Farfalee nodded. “We’ve grown less fertile. Only six children have been born to the Amar Kabal during the past thirty years. My son, Lodan, is one of them. I could hardly believe I was going to be a mother after lifetimes of trying. I may be one of the last. As a people we will endure only as long as our seeds stay healthy and keep getting planted. Drake is not the first of us to be reborn without a functional amar. Nor will he be the last.”

“Could somebody use Edomic to fix the way Eldrin made you?”

She shook her head. “Such expertise no longer exists. Even the most capable wizard from ages past would probably fall short of the task. Only Eldrin could have given our race the chance to endure, and he opted to limit our population, much as Zokar did with his creations.”

“I know your laws forbid it,” Jason said, “but what if you studied Edomic? You know, learned to repair yourselves.”

“Some among us have argued that we should study Edomic. My brother is one of them. Such thinking is foolishness. We were engineered to have little aptitude for Edomic. The most adept among us could never achieve enough power to justify the risk. Any of the Amar Kabal who tamper with Edomic risk fulfilling the prophecy that such activity will bring about our demise.”

“Labeling me a fool behind my back?” Drake asked from behind.

Farfalee turned to face him. “I’ve issued no labels that I would hesitate to repeat in front of you. You are a fool to toy with Edomic and to advocate its use

to other seedfolk. You could bring about the end of our race for the lofty aspiration of igniting small fires without tinder.”

“I still normally need tinder,” Drake explained. “But I can manage the feat without flint.”

“Foolishness.”

“You speak Edomic better than I do.”

“That’s different,” Farfalee insisted. “I only speak to communicate. Never to command.”

Drake waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t worry, Failie. No prophecy would have included me. I’m a disgrace and an outcast.”

Farfalee shrugged. “Your words, not mine.”

He folded his arms. “Very well, sister, how would you label me?”

She looked at him seriously for a moment. “You are certainly an outcast. But so is my husband, and I have greater respect for no man living. You have made some poor choices, Drake, but here we stand. You keep correcting your course. Few men are as true to themselves and their instincts. I would say that you are much closer to being a hero than a disgrace.”

Drake looked away. Jason could tell her words had touched him. Regaining his composure, the seedman squinted at the slowly gaining interceptor. “This should time out well.”

“Our pursuers will be in position before nightfall,” Farfalee said.

“Think we can sink it?” Jason asked.

“Aram likes the plan,” Drake replied. “As does Heg. As do I. Bat volunteered to do the honors.”

The plan was simple. With night falling, and the interceptor directly behind them, the crew of the *Valiant* would lighten the load slightly by throwing some nonessentials overboard. A drinling would jump into the sea along with the junk. He would bring a pair of orantium globes. The *Valiant* would hold a steady course, which would hopefully lure the pursuing ship right past the drinling in the water.

“Will we circle back for him?” Farfalee asked. She and Corinne had spent more days with Bat than the rest of them.

“It has been a matter of debate,” Drake said. “Seems heartless to leave him. But we’d have to go against the wind. It could cost a lot of time. Bat claims he can make it to shore on his own. I don’t know. Tireless or not, we’re far from land.”

Farfalee nodded. "If you're right about the empire learning our plans, we can ill afford to lose time."

"Hence the debate," Drake said. "Heg and Nia insist we should leave the drinling behind. Aram seems to be leaning their way. Jasher and I would rather return for him."

Looking out at the water, Jason envisioned himself stranded at sea, alone, no boat or land in sight, gentle swells rising and falling around him. He could think of few predicaments more intimidating. Clearing his throat, he asked, "What are the chances he could make it?"

Drake shrugged. "He'll go over the side with plenty of debris to help him keep afloat. Not quite a raft, but enough to rest on. Unlike us, he can drink seawater. He would bring provisions. If he can keep his bearings and survive, Bat might reach land within a week or two."

"Or he might die miserably and alone," Farfalee added. "Without an imminent threat, it strikes me as disgraceful to abandon a hero who risks his life to save the rest of us."

"What does Bat want?" Jason wondered.

"He insists that we shouldn't return for him," Drake said. "Claims it will jeopardize the mission and belittle his sacrifice."

"Bat has to say that," Farfalee sighed. "Drinlings were created to sacrifice in battle. The concept might even be supported by their physiology at an instinctive level. They view death in combat as the glorious fulfillment of their destinies. Eldrin taught them that they are expendable, and they believe it. Unless blatantly mistreated, drinlings will readily suffer and die for the good of their allies."

Drake nodded. "The prospect of the rest of us placing the mission at risk to come to his rescue is utterly foreign to him. The group does not bend for the individual."

"If that's how he's been trained to feel," Jason said, "wouldn't we be taking advantage of him?"

Farfalee huffed softly. "If the imperials have learned our destination, returning for Bat truly could endanger the mission. For the good of all Lyrian, our mission must succeed. By design or not, Bat sincerely would not want us to go back for him. And he truly does stand a chance of surviving on his own."

"My sister the pragmatist," Drake said. "Should I tell Nia and Heg that we're willing to abandon Bat?"

Farfalee gave a reluctant nod. "If they recommend it, and Bat is willing, our need is too great to defy them."

"I'll convey our consent." Drake walked away.

Farfalee turned to Jason. "How do you feel about that decision?"

"I don't know. It kind of feels wrong."

"It does. But is it necessary?"

Jason folded his arms and scrunched his brow. "Maybe. Probably. What an awful choice."

She stared at the pursuing ship. "I doubt either decision could feel right. We can risk Bat's life, or we can risk the mission. The oracle warned that Lyrian must be purchased with sacrifice. I fear Bat may be one of many to come."

"What if he fails?"

"We will be even less able to go back for him. If his failure reveals our intentions, we probably won't be able to succeed with a similar ploy. If his failure goes unnoticed, we'll have to try again, perhaps involving the skiff or one of the launches."

Jason turned and watched Drake speaking with Nia, Heg, and Bat. Nia and Heg looked satisfied, and Bat looked overjoyed. The bravery of his smile left Jason resisting tears.

"How could we possibly show Bat how much we appreciate him?" Jason asked.

"We succeed," Farfalee replied.

\* \* \*

By the time the glowing streaks of sunset began to fade from the western clouds, Bat stood ready to jump. Several crates, barrels, and pallets had been collected to heave over the side with him. The little raft of planks he would use as a personal flotation device was larger than a paddleboard, and some impromptu carpentry had made it quite stable. He had food, gear for catching fish, and an improvised snorkel. And of course he had the two orantium spheres.

"Stay low," Jasher cautioned. "Keep wreckage between yourself and the ship. Use the breathing tube to stay submerged whenever possible."

"Don't worry," Bat said. "They won't see me. I'll get close enough not to miss. They'll drown without knowing what happened."

"We can't have everyone crowding the rear of the ship to watch," Aram said. "Certainly not until after Bat strikes. Dump your debris, then man your stations."

Jason has been near the stern all day. He and Jasher will serve as lookouts. Until the explosion we can't display excessive interest."

"It's time," Farfalee said. "Swim safely, Bat. We are all indebted."

Bat grinned. "Don't thank me yet."

Heg drew near and whispered something to Bat, who nodded and whispered something back. The two men gripped forearms. Bat looked eager.

"Positions," Aram ordered, his voice deeper now that he had grown. Drinlings moved to both sides of the ship. Bat got ready, his floatation device in hand.

Jasher and Jason strolled to the rear of the ship.

Aram gave the command. Crates, barrels, pallets, and other wooden fragments went over the side along with Bat. The ship was advancing at a good pace, thanks to the steady breeze, so it did not take long before Jason saw the debris trailing on the water. He tried not to stare at Bat's flotation device.

The interceptor was closer than ever, not more than fifteen ship lengths behind. It would overtake the flotsam before long.

Jasher raised the spyglass, directing it at the ship, not the debris. "We're being pursued by the *Avenger*," he reported. "I can finally make out the name. Have a look."

Jason accepted the spyglass. "Do we seem too interested?"

"We've been gazing at them all day. You in particular. They've almost caught us. It would seem more peculiar if we didn't watch."

Jason peered into the eyepiece. The light of the dying sunset barely let him read the name of the ship. "Hopefully, they won't avenge anything today."

"They think they have us," Jasher said. "They've gained on us throughout the day. Lightening our load made us look desperate. They're focused on us, not the debris. They're prepping for battle. Making sure the pitch is hot, the catapults ready. Archers are stringing bows. Boarding parties are assembling. The captain is waiting to see what maneuver we'll try."

Once he lowered the spyglass, Jason had trouble spotting the debris. "Bat is closer to them than to us."

"If only he can fight the currents enough to stay in their path," Jasher said. "He just has to get close."

"What if they catch him when they abandon ship?" Jason worried.

"It's an additional risk he's taking," Jasher said. "If the *Avenger* founders, it should sail well past Bat before anybody gets in the water. He can keep low and swim tirelessly. They'll have many more pressing matters to worry about. I like

his chances of avoiding our enemies. Making it to land should prove the tougher test. Watch it unfold through the spyglass.”

Jason did as he was told. He could see some activity on the deck. A man was climbing the rigging. He and Jasher watched in silence.

“Concentrate on the right side,” Jasher advised.

“You see him?”

“I think so. He’s close. Almost too close. Get ready for it.”

The explosion centered just above the waterline at the right front side of the ship. The bright flash sent wooden fragments flying. The percussive boom roared a moment later. Smoke bloomed upward. Once the view cleared, Jason saw a cave-sized hole.

“Yes!” Jason exclaimed. “He got—”

He was interrupted by a second explosion just above the waterline on the right side of the *Avenger*. He was viewing the explosion in profile, so it was a bad angle from which to appreciate the damage, but judging from the position of the detonation, the hole would have to be similar to the first.

Raucous cheering broke out aboard the *Valiant*. All pretenses abandoned, just about everyone crowded the stern, whooping and jeering and clapping. Bat’s name was chanted in unison.

It was impossible to see what exactly had happened to Bat, but the listing *Avenger* must have sailed well past him before it really started to wallow. Aram ordered a few drinlings back to their stations. As twilight deepened, everyone else stayed put to watch the *Avenger* sink.

# ADVICE

Fingering the strand of charms around her neck, Rachel strolled along a crunchy trail of white pebbles. Sparkling footpaths wound all about the courtyard, past blooming flower beds, clipped grass, colorful shrubs, and leafy creepers ascending trellised walls. Fluffy springtime blossoms made the trees pink and purple. The aroma of nectar enriched the air, to the evident delight of fat, humming bees.

“Mind if I intrude?” asked a friendly voice.

Rachel turned and found Ferrin approaching. Since the day before her disturbing dream, the displacer had been away with Nedwin, delivering messages for Galloran. Rachel glanced over at the gazebo, where Tark and Io sat together. They were always near enough to keep an eye on her, but they tended to keep their distance lately. In some ways she suspected her spooky new outfit worked too well, intimidating even her friends. Tark looked at her inquisitively, as if wondering whether she desired his intervention. She waved a hand to dismiss his concerns.

Ferrin caught the gesture. “Thank you for restraining your attack dogs.”

Rachel smiled. “They’ve been extra vigilant ever since . . . Did you hear?”

“Lurkers broke into your room and entered your dreams.”

She nodded, a hand on her necklace. “I should have kept wearing this.”

Ferrin shrugged. “Had this attempt failed, Maldor would have found some other way to contact you. If he was willing to order torivors into a city, he really wanted that message to reach you.”

“Or he really wanted to scour my brain. He learned about the prophecy.”

“I was informed. How did Galloran react?”

Rachel wrung her hands. “He didn’t want me to worry. He told me Maldor already knew that we planned to attack. He told me Maldor would have learned the prophecy one way or another. He told me the lurkers could just as easily have searched any of our minds.”

“But that response doesn’t satisfy you.”

“What if I blew it?” Rachel asked softly. “What if I already ruined our chance to fulfill the prophecy? What if I got Jason and Corinne killed?”

Ferrin shook his head. “It wasn’t your—”

“I could have worn the charms,” Rachel said. “But I was tired of them. I was relieved to take a break from wearing them, since the city was supposed to be free from lurkers. If I had worn the charms, I could have delayed Maldor from learning the prophecy. What if that would have made all the difference? What if we’ve already lost our chance to succeed?”

Ferrin watched her, arms folded, expression serious.

“What?” she finally asked.

“Maldor is very good at what he does.”

“Getting information?”

“That too. But I meant destroying confidence. Spreading fear and uncertainty. What offer did he make you?”

A line appeared between Rachel’s eyebrows. “Galloran promised not to—”

“Nobody told me about an offer,” Ferrin said. “I just know how the emperor operates.”

Rachel glanced at Tark and Io in the gazebo. She didn’t want anyone to overhear. She had only shared this with Galloran. “Maldor promised that if I went to train with him, he would let me save ten of my friends. Any ten I choose.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Should I?”

Ferrin sighed deeply. “I worked with Maldor for a long time. Immunity for ten people is the most generous offer I have ever heard him make. He really wants you, which probably means he would fulfill his promise.”

“You think?”

“Just make sure you grasp the ramifications. Do you suppose a man like Galloran would accept immunity? He turned down Harthenham. Most of the people you want to protect would refuse the protection.”

“Would you accept it?” Rachel asked.

“Me? Full immunity? Better if we don’t discuss it.”

Rachel lowered her voice to her quietest whisper. “Maldor seems so confident he’ll win. I’m not sure he’s wrong.”

Ferrin almost replied, then stopped and indicated a slightly curved stone bench. “Sit down.” They sat together. A fuzzy bee circled Rachel before zipping



away into some nearby shrubs. Ferrin leaned close to her. “Maldor will probably win.”

“Comforting,” Rachel muttered.

“I’m not trying to comfort you,” Ferrin said gravely. “Not right now. I wish I could console you with soothing lies, but I think what you need at the moment is the truth. The oracle told us that Maldor will almost certainly emerge victorious. We have a minute chance of stopping him. Such a small chance that it almost certainly will not happen.”

“I guess I knew that,” Rachel whispered shakily.

“That truth could be tempting to forget amid the rousing speeches and busy preparations. Galloran knows how to inspire and mobilize those around him. But don’t let his rhetoric confuse the reality of the situation. If our aim is to dethrone Maldor, we’ve been warned that we’ll probably fail.”

“Right.”

“You might be correct about the danger of Maldor learning the prophecy this early. The untimely warning may have already obliterated our meager chances. Any number of other mishaps or decisions may also have destroyed our opportunity for victory. Our cause might already be unwinnable.”

Rachel nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“You have a gift,” Ferrin said. “Maldor wants to develop that gift. You could gain more power and position than any of the rest of us could dream. You could be second to Maldor. You could surpass him. You could one day become empress.”

“I don’t want that,” Rachel whispered.

“Keep in mind, the alternative is not anonymity. The alternative is almost certain death and failure.”

Rachel laced her fingers and squeezed her hands into one big fist. “You think I should go to him?”

“I think you should confront the truth of the situation. I can tell you’re struggling under the weight of worries that you don’t want to face and desires that you don’t care to admit. I’ve seen your passion for Edomic. You would love to learn its mysteries from a true master. Don’t bury the truth. Confront it.”

“How? By accepting his offer?”

Ferrin shook his head. “Not necessarily. You have a choice before you. Confront the truth by honestly assessing the alternatives. Acknowledge the price of your options.”

Rachel gave him a suspicious stare. "Is this how you go through life? Are you trying to turn me into a displacer?"

"Maybe a little. What is the price of denying Maldor?"

Rachel took a shuddering breath. "I probably die. My friends probably die. And we probably die for nothing. We probably lose."

"And you miss the chance to live in comfort and power for a thousand years or more," Ferrin added. "You miss the chance to master Edomic."

"Right."

"What is the price of accepting the offer?"

Rachel sighed. "I learn Edomic and get to live a thousand years."

"No. That is the reward. The price is that your friends will probably end up miserable. There are no happy people at Harthenham. There is no peace for those who abandon their ideals. Regardless of the pact you make, most of your friends will probably die anyhow, because they'll reject whatever pardon Maldor offers."

"True," Rachel said.

"Another part of the price is that you will cease to be who you are. No matter how valiantly you resist, after you enter into an arrangement like this, Maldor will corrupt you. Even if you bide your time and eventually overthrow him, you will not be the person you are today. You will become a person who you would otherwise never want to be."

"And the reward for denying Maldor?"

"You stay true to your friends. You let them face this evil on their own terms. You stand against this evil on your own terms as well, without letting it own you. And you keep that minuscule shred of hope that we might succeed."

"You think we still might win?" Rachel checked.

Ferrin shrugged. "The only way to know is to keep trying. We can guess what may have spoiled our chances of winning, but we can never know whether victory is still possible unless we see it through to the end. That is what Galloran understands and why news of your visit from the lurkers has not altered his plans."

Rachel leaned over and hugged Ferrin tightly. "Thank you," she whispered.

He stiffened with surprise, then hugged her back. "No need to thank me."

"I've felt really . . . I just couldn't . . ."

"I understand."

She held him quietly for a long moment before pulling away. "That was the best conversation I've ever had. I was feeling really lost. I didn't think anyone

could help me.”

“I did nothing. The choice is yours to make. You just needed to honestly consider your options.”

“Nobody else put it so plainly. Not even Galloran.”

Ferrin smirked. “The others were trying to spare you from pain. The truth can be devastating. We spend much of our lives protecting ourselves from it and shielding others as well. We use lies to take the edge off life. We dream of a better tomorrow. We hide from our regrets and inadequacies. We try to exaggerate the good and downplay the bad. We even manage to hide from the inescapable reality that sooner or later we and everyone we love is going to die.”

“Cheerful thought.”

“Not cheery, but true. When a decision really matters, Rachel, we have to ignore our comforting illusions. We must set aside our wishes and give heed to reality. Nobody can accept the truth while hiding from it. When a decision matters, we have to stare at the truth unflinchingly. Only then can we find peace in our choices.”

Rachel smiled. “Tough love.”

“You can call it that.”

Rachel nodded. “Without totally lying, Maldor was playing me. I’d like to believe that he would spare my friends, because I want them to be safe, but you’re right, it wouldn’t end up that way. They wouldn’t quit fighting. They wouldn’t accept the pardon.”

“And you want to believe we might win, when we probably won’t,” Ferrin reminded her.

“How do you keep yourself going if you feel that way?”

“If Maldor ever finds me, he will do worse than kill me. Returning to him would be folly, even if I returned after crippling your rebellion. He will never forgive a betrayal such as I have committed. I must resist Maldor, because I am forever his enemy. I also stay true to this rebellion in part because Galloran has a portion of my neck and could kill me at will. Mostly I stay true out of friendship. I admire your integrity, and Galloran’s, and Jason’s. I would like to see you succeed. I could hide in the wilderness for the rest of my life, but that does not suit my nature. This cause represents my last hope of living well. Our chances are dreadful, but at least we have a chance. Knowing the probable futility of our efforts, I still accept this bleak path as my best available option.”

Rachel offered no reply. They listened to the birds.

Ferrin nodded toward the well near the center of the courtyard. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'm all right. How was your mission?"

Ferrin leaned forward, rubbing his hands together. "As far as we could reach by horseback in the time allotted, people are flocking to the cause. Most do not seem to fully appreciate how hopeless this campaign will be. Nearly everyone is ready to bet on Galloran. He'll have the men he needs to mount his assault. And the supplies, which is equally vital."

"How soon?" Rachel asked.

"Galloran hoped to be underway by tomorrow. He won't get his wish. But it won't take many more days. We'll be marching off to war much more quickly than I would have predicted."

Rachel stared down at her hands. "I never imagined myself going to war."

"I always pitied the first army that would try to assail Felrook. I had begun to assume it would never happen. Now I'll be part of it."

"At least we won't be alone," Rachel said.

Ferrin smiled faintly. "I'll die in good company. Probably a better end than I deserve."

Rachel regarded Ferrin thoughtfully. "What do you know about lurkers?"

"Less than you, probably. I've never had one in my dreams or heard one with my mind."

"Where do they come from?"

"Not our world," Ferrin said. "Their origin is a perfectly guarded secret."

"They told me their world is like our dreams. They don't seem to like our reality."

Ferrin nodded, as if the information fit his understanding. "Zokar brought the torivors to our world and established dominance over them. He subjected them to his will. Maldor wears a black jewel, the Myrkstone, which is somehow connected to the torivors. How he controls them is a secret, but it exacts a toll. He has been seen vomiting blood after sending torivors on a mission. He never dispatches them lightly."

"What if we could free them? Would they rebel against Maldor?"

Ferrin chuckled. "You have quite an imagination. Hard to guess how the darklings would respond to freedom. Nobody knows enough about them. Maybe they would turn on Maldor. Maybe they would go on a wild rampage. Maybe they would leave our world."

"Where are they kept?"

“At Felrook. Nobody is certain exactly where. Nobody wants to find out. Torivors are trouble, Rachel. The worst kind of trouble. They can sense our thoughts. You should put them out of your mind.”

“I didn’t invite them,” she reminded him.

“I know.”

She fingered her charm necklace. “I don’t plan to take this off anytime soon.”

“Probably wise. Has Copernum visited you lately?”

“No. I haven’t seen him in days.”

“That is for the best. Under no circumstances should he be trusted.” Ferrin stood. “What are your plans for the remainder of the day?”

“I was hoping to brood. Then maybe mope a little.”

“You keeping up with your Edomic?”

“Yeah. Three hours this morning. I’ll work more tonight.”

Ferrin nodded, hands on his hips. “I’ve been trying to devise some practical applications for your abilities. I want to have some spheres crafted the same size as standard orantium globes. We should put a little stone inside to help the replicas match as best we can. I want to find out how effectively you can manipulate them. It could prove significant in battle.”

“Good idea.”

“And locks. I want to teach you how locks work. You keep pushing around larger and larger objects. I think you should also experiment with some delicate finesse. Shouldn’t require a lot of clout, just knowledge of where to push.”

Rachel grinned. “That could be useful.”

“I expect it might. Want to give it a try?”

“Sure.”

Ferrin took her hand and helped her to her feet.

# WINDBREAK ISLAND

Jason stood outside the small cabin, bracing himself for the smell. The stench of vomit always made him want to puke, and losing his lunch was not likely to help Corinne feel any better. He had volunteered to deliver the news because he felt guilty about not visiting her very often. Maybe he should have found another way to show his concern. Straightening like a soldier, he knocked with two knuckles.

“Yes,” came the reply. She was trying to sound normal but not quite succeeding.

“It’s Jason. Can I come in?”

“Just a moment.” He heard her scuffling around. “All right.”

Jason opened the door and found Corinne sitting on the floor against the wall. One of the cracks between the planks had left a straight mark on her cheek, so he knew she had been lying down. Her hair looked stringy, her lips chapped. A glowing length of seaweed cast green light on her pallid features. The smell was less terrible than he had expected. Her puke bucket was empty.

“Not using the bunk?” he asked.

She shook her head, a careful motion. “The floor feels best.” Her lips quivered and she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Lie back down.”

Nodding faintly, she spread out on the floor and pressed a damp cloth to her forehead. She seemed to be perspiring, though it might have been moisture from the rag. He watched her breathe.

“Can I get you anything?” Jason asked.

“Water. Barrel. Corner.”

He went to the cask in the corner, lifted the lid, and dipped in a little tin cup. He set it beside her on the floor.

“Sorry,” she said. “Hard to talk.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Propping herself up on an elbow, Corinne lifted the cup and took a tiny sip. She paused, as if assessing how it made her feel, then tried a bigger sip. She started coughing, leaned over the bucket, and retched.

Stomach churning, Jason turned away. There was no escaping the smell. As it hit him, the room suddenly seemed warmer and more cramped. He clenched his teeth.

“Sorry,” Corinne apologized wretchedly.

“Don’t worry about me,” Jason replied valiantly. “I’m sorry you’re so sick.”

Corinne picked up a rag and wiped her mouth. “I can’t suppress the nausea. I can’t will it away. Everything I eat comes back up sooner or later. I feel a little better right after I throw up. It never lasts long.”

“I have good news.”

She perked up a little. “What?”

“We can finally see Windbreak Island.”

She gave a tired smile. “Dry land?”

“Dry land. Of course, it means we’ll have to deal with the Maumet.”

“Anything to get off this boat,” Corinne groaned. “Maumets, lurkers, you name it. Have we spotted any other ships?”

“Nothing yet. If the emperor has learned our destination, Aram is worried ships might hide on the far side of the island.”

“Why does it have to be an island?” Corinne lamented. “The only way off is more sailing. If we defeat the Maumet, maybe I’ll just stay there, live in the library.”

“I know you like books,” Jason said.

She nodded, then grimaced. Her hand cradled her abdomen. “I’m already feeling queasy. . . . It never stops.”

“Rest,” Jason said. “We’ll get you to dry ground soon.”

She closed her eyes tightly and gently lay on her side, head cradled on the crook of her elbow. “Thanks . . . news.”

Jason exited the cabin and walked away, grateful to escape the smell of her puke. He wished he knew how to comfort her. Whenever he visited, it seemed like Corinne would rather be alone. She either wanted rest or she was lost in her suffering. When he tried to talk to her or console her, he ended up feeling like a nuisance. He couldn’t blame her. He hated the sensation of nausea. She hadn’t had much of a break from it in almost a week.

On deck Jason went to the bow and peered ahead at the island, gray with distance. Jasher stood there as well.

“How long?” Jason asked.

Jasher glanced up at the sails. “The wind is dwindling again, and the direction has been inconstant. Could take most of the day. Could take longer.”

“Do we have a plan?” Jason wondered.

“Farfalee and Aram have something in mind. We’re about to confer. You should join us.”

“Sure.”

“How is Corinne?”

“Miserable.”

“The voyage has been relatively smooth,” Jasher said. “She will never be a sailor.”

“I think she’s fine with that.”

Jasher led Jason over to where Aram, Farfalee, Drake, Nia, and Heg stood in a loose huddle. Heg had taken to wearing a wool cap he had found belowdecks. He stood shorter than Jason, but with wider shoulders and much bigger hands. Gray stubble lined his jaw.

“Have you started without us?” Jasher asked.

“You’re just in time,” Aram said, nodding a welcome to Jason. “First order of business will be to circle the island. I do not expect to find enemy ships lurking on the far side, but we can’t risk getting attacked by sea while fighting the Maumet on land.”

“Agreed,” Jasher said.

“Once we’re anchored, I propose we send two launches to shore,” Aram continued. “One will land; one will wait on the water. The crew of the first launch will engage the Maumet and find out what exactly we’re dealing with. The second crew will include Jason, Jasher, and Farfalee. If we can delay or restrain the Maumet, they may opt to hurry to the library. If not, they can witness the threat we’re facing.”

“The people in the first launch will be bait?” Jason checked.

“In a sense,” Aram said. “They’ll fight to hold the Maumet at bay.”

“Who goes in the first launch?” Jasher asked.

“I’ll lead a team of drinlings,” Aram replied.

“You’re our captain!” Jasher said. “We can’t afford to lose you.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Drake offered.

Aram shook his head. “When the sun is down, I have the best armor, the longest reach, and the biggest sword. I promise not to throw my life away. I want to help protect the others and inspect our enemy up close.”



“Aram is taking this captaincy too earnestly,” Drake said. “His caution is fading. He’s ready to go down with the ship.”

“I have no plan to die on Windbreak Island,” Aram said. “There is a time for caution and a time for action. This affair with the Maumet will require action. If we make it around the island before nightfall, we’ll land in the evening. If not, we’ll make landfall before dawn.”

“You could watch us attack the monster from the other launch,” Heg suggested to Aram. “You’re among the chosen ones named in the prophecy. We can’t risk losing you. You should study our skirmish and lead a second squad.”

Jason thought about what Farfalee had said about the willingness of drinlings to sacrifice themselves. Bat had risked himself for the group, as had the drinlings on the wall at Durna. Was it right to keep taking advantage of that tendency by letting them volunteer for the most deadly assignments? Jason wondered whether he should volunteer to join the first group.

Aram shook his head. “I’m the best equipped for this confrontation. You brought good men and women with you, Heg. I respect you, and I respect them. I’ll not sit by and watch their demise when I might help prevent it. If I’m named in the prophecy, all the more reason I should be involved.”

“I’ll join Aram’s squad,” Jasher said. “Why plan for failure? Perhaps we can dispatch the Maumet on the first try.”

Jason looked from Jasher to Aram. He didn’t want the drinlings to die, nor did he want his friends to take the risk instead. Were there other options? Maybe he could help directly! Why should he always sit on the sidelines? “I’ll come too,” he offered.

“Sorry, Jason,” Farfalee said. “I’m sure you’d make a good showing, but you’re the last person we can risk.”

Jason didn’t like how automatically she shot him down. “I’m sick of hiding behind other people. Aram made a good point. Maybe those of us named in the prophecy have a bigger responsibility to get involved in stuff like this.”

“You’ll get your chances,” Jasher pledged. “But I agree with my wife that we can only endanger you when it becomes most necessary. You’re not hiding behind anybody. We all have our duties. Everyone aboard this ship is risking everything. Don’t worry. Aram and I will watch our step. None of us are in a rush to throw our lives away.”

“I’ll second that,” Aram grunted.

Jason decided he had better back down. If everyone was against him on this, it would do no good to keep complaining. Although part of him felt embarrassed

to have his offer denied, a more secret part was relieved to avoid the danger.

“Maybe one squad isn’t enough,” Nia speculated. “Should we attack the Maumet with a larger force? Try to overwhelm it?”

Farfalee shook her head. “If numbers were the only issue, others would have destroyed it long ago.”

“So eight of us are supposed to succeed where an army would fail?” Drake verified.

“We’ll examine what we’re dealing with,” Aram said. “We’ll test the effectiveness of various weapons—blunt ones, sharp ones, projectiles. I’ll bring orantium.”

“I wonder if Corinne would loan me her sword,” Jasher mused.

“I’ll loan you mine,” Jason said.

Jasher shook his head. “If you end up going ashore, you’ll need it.”

“There will probably be no chance for a second party to go ashore,” Farfalee said. “If a simple diversion would work, the library would have been breached ages ago. I agree that we should test ourselves against the Maumet, but if it appears unbeatable, the landing party should fall back.”

“I’m in no rush to die again,” Jasher assured her.

“The guardian can transform itself?” Heg checked.

“We believe it can change form,” Aram recounted. “According to Ferrin, the Maumet can mimic the properties of any material it touches. We have to find out how that works in practice, search for weaknesses.”

“Any idea how far the Maumet can stray from the island?” Drake asked.

“We know it can’t leave the island,” Farfalee replied. “Otherwise, it would have done so long ago. But we have no idea how far it can venture into the sea.”

Aram rubbed his hands together briskly. “Only one way to find out. If we’re done here, I need to check our heading.”

“Very well,” Farfalee agreed. “I hate to risk losing any of our number, but I fear risk will be an inevitable companion for the remainder of our journey.”

“I’ll join Jason and Farfalee in the second launch,” Heg said. “I’ll organize drinlings to fill the remaining needs of the two squads.”

The meeting ended and everyone dispersed. Jason wandered to the front of the ship to watch the island. The salty breeze came generally from the east, sometimes gusting from the southeast and occasionally blowing from the northeast. At times the *Valiant* turned into the wind at an angle, sails positioned to keep slicing forward. For some stretches the wind pushed the ship from

behind at a good pace. The drinlings adjusted the sails often, and the sweeps sloshed endlessly.

The prospect of fighting the Maumet kept Jason patient as he watched Windbreak Island draw imperceptibly closer. He knew they needed to get there ahead of their enemies. But part of him was in no hurry. What if the creature decimated Aram, Jasher, and the rest of their squad? Jason frowned. What if it came out into the water and destroyed the people in his own launch boat as well? His frown deepened. What if the Maumet attacked the ship? Jason was not eager for answers to those questions.

All they really knew about the Maumet was that it could transform into different substances and that it had been feared by the most powerful people in Lyrian since the days of Eldrin. From the current distance Windbreak Island looked innocent, but Jason knew that it might end up as his cemetery.

Hour by hour the island came into sharper focus. Eventually shorebirds squawked above the ship, some with dark plumage and red feet, others white with gray tail feathers. By evening Jason could discern beaches, trees, and jagged hills. He could also see the enormous domes of a colossal building curving above the treetops on the eastern side of the island, near the crest of a long slope. Jasher confirmed that the gargantuan edifice was the Celestine Library. Supposedly, the location of Darian the Pyromancer awaited inside.

As the light failed, a larger Aram guided the ship in a wide circle around the island. Windbreak Island was several miles long and at least a few miles across, with steep cliffs on the northwestern side and several long sandbars to the southwest. Everyone aboard kept watch, but they found no hidden enemy ships. They anchored the *Valiant* off the eastern side of the island, near a pristine beach of white sand. The moon made the beach ghostly, and glowed off the five domes visible up the slope from the coast. The two largest domes overshadowed the other three. As Jason considered the library by moonlight, Farfalee came to his side.

“Quite a sight,” she said.

“Have you been there before?” Jason wondered.

“No. But I did work for years in the Great Document Hall at Elbureth. The Maumet has dwelled here since our race was young. The Abomination is very old.”

“Old enough to be getting weaker?”

“Wouldn’t that be fortunate? We will know much more tomorrow.”

“I looked for it all day,” Jason said. “I never saw anything.”

“We were all keeping watch. The creature has not shown itself. But I expect it is aware of us.”

“What kind of books are in the library?” Jason asked.

“Many have speculated,” Farfalee said. “Certainly the collection contains the majority of the oldest surviving writings in Lyrian. Many will be written in Sulcrix, a phonetic shorthand version of Edomic. Even the characters would be unrecognizable to most. Some of the texts will be in our current common tongue.”

“Can anyone read Sulcrix?”

She nodded. “I can. Drake can read a little Sulcrix. Jasher less. I am quite fluent in twelve languages, most of them scholarly, some of them dead. My most obvious role in this mission will be locating the information we seek here.”

“Looks like a big library,” Jason remarked.

“Vast,” she agreed. “Zokar wanted to seal off the information from his enemies without harming the texts, so he imprisoned the Maumet here. Presumably, he planned to move the Maumet elsewhere after his foes were vanquished.”

“But he lost, so the Maumet has guarded the place ever since.”

Farfalee turned to Jason. “You should rest. Tomorrow will be eventful.”

Jason nodded. “Guess I might as well try.”

\* \* \*

By the time Drake jostled Jason awake, the launches had already been lowered into the water. Sunrise was perhaps an hour away. They wanted to reach the shore with light in the sky, but before the sunrise would shrink Aram.

The others were finishing a breakfast of unsweetened oatmeal. Jason accepted a bowl of lukewarm mush and began hurriedly eating.

“Quiet this morning,” Nia observed, staring at the island. “What if the Maumet doesn’t show itself?”

“I don’t want to stray far from the beach on this first foray,” Aram said, adjusting his leather cloak over his heavy shirt of overlapping rings. “If the Maumet means to lie in wait out of sight, we’ll have to devise a new strategy. We had best move out before the daylight renders me frail.”

Jason gulped down the last of his oatmeal before descending a rope ladder to one of the launches. Eight people fit comfortably in each. Farfalee, Drake, Nia, and Heg were all in his boat. Three other drinlings joined them, two of them at the oars.

Aram and Jasher were in the other launch, along with six drinlings, including Ux. Zoo was the only female going ashore.

The launches moved away from the *Valiant* toward the white sand beach. The swells were noticeable, rocking the launches gently, but could not have competed with ocean waves. The modest breakers seldom rose above eighteen inches as they curled against the shore. The drinling rowers maneuvered the launches with little difficulty.

The launches were roughly a hundred yards from the beach when a dark figure strode out onto the sand. In form it looked just like a lurker—a smooth humanoid shape without a face. But the similarity ended there. Although not clumsy, the figure did not move with the shadowy stealth of a torivor. It rocked slightly as it walked forward, kicking up sand with each stride. Composed of reddish-brown wood, the creature was much larger than any torivor Jason had seen.

“Is that the Maumet?” Nia asked. “It doesn’t look so tough.”

The wooden figure stopped at the center of the beach and held perfectly still, arms at its sides, facing the launches. It made no sound.

“Stay back,” Aram called from the other launch. “Watch closely.”

“It isn’t entering the water,” Drake murmured. “That’s a good sign.”

“Don’t draw conclusions yet,” Farfalee cautioned, setting an arrow to the string of her bow.

Jason’s launch wobbled on the swells, holding steady as Aram’s launch powered toward the shore. The Maumet made no move as the launch neared the beach. The craft rasped onto the sand, and the people inside piled out, weapons held high as they splashed away from the shallows. One strapping drinling remained beside the launch, ready for a quick getaway.

Aram, Jasher, Ux, Zoo, and three other drinlings fanned out and approached the Maumet in a loose arc. Jasher drew the torivorian sword he had borrowed from Corinne. The wooden figure seemed inanimate, more like a driftwood scarecrow than a fearsome enemy. The stillness was unnerving, because they had all seen it moving. Raising a fist, Aram signaled for his squad to halt.

With the squad in a loose semicircle before the Maumet, Jason could see that it stood at least ten feet high, making Aram look like the tallest of a group of children. Farfalee pulled an arrow to her cheek. Jason gripped the gunwale.

Aram had brought a pair of orantium spheres. Hefting one of them, he flung it at the stationary Maumet. His aim was good, but the wooden figure dodged the globe, and it landed on the sand without bursting. Farfalee released her

arrow, which struck the wooden creature in the chest and remained there. Showing no discomfort from the arrow, the Maumet rushed Aram. Drinlings closed from either side to help their captain face the creature.

The Maumet was quick. A leg lashed out and struck Aram squarely in the chest, sending him tumbling across the sand, ring mail jangling, his sword still in hand. A drinling soldier whacked the Maumet in the hip with an ax before getting clubbed in the head by a wooden forearm. Batting away the sword of another drinling, the Maumet kicked the warrior in the side, the blow simultaneously folding him over and sending him flying.

Jasher, Ux, and Zoo had been on the far side of the semicircle from Aram, and they rushed the Maumet from behind. Ux crunched his mace against the creature's thigh, noisily splitting the wood. Zoo dove low, attacking an ankle with a pair of hatchets. The Maumet spun and swung a vicious backhand. With a beautifully timed swing of his sword, Jasher hacked the wooden hand off at the wrist. The severed hand turned to dust in the air.

Shaking free from Zoo, the Maumet hobbled away. A new hand promptly formed, and the cracks and gouges on the leg closed.

"Did it lose a little size to replace the hand?" Farfalee said, peering through a spyglass. "When the hand was severed, I think that mass was lost."

"So it adjusted," Drake said. "Reformed the hand with material from elsewhere."

"Will we have to destroy it one hand at a time?" Jason asked.

"I hope not," Farfalee murmured. "It's quick and strong."

Another drinling charged the Maumet. The creature caught his war hammer by the haft just below the head and punched him in the face with its free hand. Instantly the Maumet turned a glossy white. The fallen drinling scrambled to his feet, wiping his sleeve against his face. Clutching the captured war hammer, the Maumet backed away so that all the combatants were in front of it, then held still.

Aram had risen, as had the drinling who'd gotten clubbed on the head. The drinling who had received the kick in the side lay motionless on the white sand.

"Did it change to sand?" Drake asked.

"I don't think so," Farfalee said. "Right color, wrong texture."

"Tooth enamel," Jason realized.

"The Maumet hit Kay in the mouth right when it transformed," Drake said.

"Tooth enamel!" Farfalee cried, in case those on the beach had not realized.

Aram threw his other orantium sphere. The Maumet flung the war hammer. The two objects collided in midair. Though at least ten yards away, the brilliant explosion knocked down Aram and a drinling.

The Maumet charged at those still standing. The drinlings and Jasher fell back and spread out, those at the sides trying to curl around and get behind the attacker. Aram staggered back to his feet as well, racing toward the combat. An arrow from Farfalee glanced off the Maumet's shoulder, chipping it.

The enamel figure kicked Zoo aside and used two hands to snap Kay's neck. Mace ready, Ux came in low and bashed the Maumet in the shin, shattering the bottom of the leg. The foot and lower shin all turned to dust, leaving behind a jagged stump. The Maumet plunged the spiky stump into Ux, who gurgled and twitched.

Jasher leaped from behind, swinging the torivorian sword in a vicious two-handed stroke. The instant the blade hit the Maumet at the waist, the creature turned a gleaming metallic color. Jason had hoped to witness a crippling blow, but he realized in horror that the Maumet had become torivorian steel.

An ax-wielding drinling whacked the creature in the thigh with a resounding clang. The ax fell from his hands, the bit notched. An arrow from Farfalee pinged off the Maumet's head. A hatchet thrown by Zoo clinked against the chest. None of the blows had scratched the reflective surface.

The lower leg and foot grew back, reducing the Maumet's stature a small degree, and then the creature snatched the nearest drinling and tore him in half. The Maumet now moved more jerkily, metal body shrieking as if resisting the motion. But it wasn't dramatically slower than before.

"Fall back!" Aram cried.

Four drinlings were now down. Only Jasher, Zoo, Aram, and the drinling beside the boat remained standing. While Zoo and Aram ran for the boat, Jasher dashed away from the water and retrieved the undetonated orantium globe from the sand. The Maumet pursued Aram and Zoo. The drinling by the launch heaved the craft into the water. Aram and Zoo splashed into the shallows.

The Maumet stopped at the edge of the water. Jasher hit it from behind with the orantium sphere. The explosion flashed, but the Maumet was indifferent. It turned to chase Jasher. The seedman raced across the sand, parallel to the waterline. Joints screeching, the Maumet tried to keep pace, but even with much longer legs, it could not quite pump them fast enough. Jasher pulled ahead and cut across to the water, sprinting through the shallows, then diving forward and swimming.

Aram helped the burly drinling who had stayed with the launch row over to Jasher, who climbed inside, sword in hand. The Maumet paced back and forth at the edge of the water, metal feet sinking deep into the damp white sand with each stride, joints squealing like tortured dolphins.

Jason finally relaxed a degree. Toward the end of the skirmish he had thought Jasher would die again for sure, and he'd worried about whether the Maumet would care about crushing an amar. On the white beach four drinlings lay where they had fallen.

Aram's launch rowed close to Jason's. Aram had a scratch on his cheek and a bleeding gash on his forehead. A huge welt disfigured the side of Zoo's face. One eye was swelling shut.

"Opinions?" Aram asked, swiping blood from his eyes.

"We're in trouble," Jason said numbly.

"Was it toying with you at first?" Drake asked.

"Looked that way," Jasher replied. "It could have turned to iron the first time we hit it with a weapon. Fight would have been over."

"Maybe at first it wanted to stay faster and more flexible," Farfalee guessed. "The wood was fairly resilient, and it moved more gracefully."

"I thought I had it," Jasher mourned. "I meant to cleave it at the waist. But the instant my blade touched it, the Maumet transformed. Quick as a blink."

"If it does that every time, what are we supposed to do?" Jason worried aloud. Once the Maumet had turned into steel, it had won the fight so quickly!

"The creature is strong," Aram said. "When it kicked me in the chest, it felt like a blow from a mallet. The impact was not square, and still it might have killed me without my armor and cloak."

"Drinlings can take punishment," Heg said. "You don't slay us with a blow to the abdomen. But it killed Ibe with a kick."

Jason looked at the beach. He tried not to stare at the bodies. Minutes earlier they had all been alive and well. Those hardy drinlings had stormed the beach, ready for a fight, but the Maumet had killed them so savagely, so easily. Had the others not run away, they would have died as well.

Farfalee gave Aram a white bandage. He held it against the gash in his forehead as he spoke. "We knew it would be bad. I had hopes at first, when Jasher severed the hand. I envisioned us chopping off limb after limb, shrinking the brute until nothing remained. But after Ux took its foot, the creature got serious. The torivorian blade may have surprised it the first time. But clearly, if



it chooses, the Maumet can immediately become any substance we use to attack it. Now I understand why everyone keeps away from this island.”

“Look,” Zoo said.

On the beach the Maumet crouched over Ux, probing him. The shiny metallic creature turned to gold-tinged skin, then to red muscle, then to white bone, then to brown leather, then finally to the black iron of Ux’s mace. Metal screaming, the Maumet stood upright.

“Solid iron,” Nia griped. “How do you fight solid iron?”

Jason shook his head in silence. He had no answer.

“We’re fortunate that any of us survived,” Jasher said. “We lost good people. Only the safety of the water let some of us escape.”

“The library must be at least a mile from the coast,” Jason said.

“Unfortunately, the task ahead will be as difficult as we anticipated,” Farfalee said. “We should return to the *Valiant* and confer.”

Drake chuckled darkly. “I’m afraid the only topic will be choosing how we die.”

# FINAL PREPARATIONS

The long stable contained more than a hundred horses, all of them impressive specimens, mounts for the elite of Trensicourt. Rachel paced down the center aisle, glancing left and right, murmuring Edomic phrases to those that interested her most. Galloran had instructed her to pick any mount she wished, and she wanted one that would respond warmly to her instructions.

Tark stood at one end of the stable, Io at the other. Neither man had struck up a conversation with her today. Rachel wore her veiled outfit of black robes. She now had three similar ensembles, and always wore one of them when out in public. In at least one way, the costume worked too well. Each day Io and Tark seemed to regard her with greater awe.

Rachel paused beside a large, dappled mare. She had learned many commands at Mianamon, but she tried something simple with only the slightest effort of will behind the suggestion. The horse backed up as requested. She gave more instructions, and without resistance or hesitation the mare reared, bowed, stamped a right foot, then a left, and at last sniffed the sweet grass on her flat palm without eating. Rachel hardly had to push to get the messages across. The mare seemed eager to please.

Rachel stroked the horse and told her to eat. "You're my girl. You're bigger than I was planning, but you're the one I want. White with gray spots . . . how about Snowflake? I know you might have another name, but Snowflake can be your nickname."

"Nedwin is coming," Io announced.

"Good," Rachel replied down the aisle. "I think I just found my horse."

The tall redhead entered the stable and moved toward her with long strides. "You found a suitable mount?"

"Better than suitable," Rachel replied, pulling her veil aside to better see him.

Nedwin drew near and regarded the horse. "Looks like a respectable choice."

"And she's smart."

“Smart can lead to ornery.”

“Not Snowflake. We have an understanding.”

“The king wishes to speak with us,” Nedwin said. “Ferrin has news.”

Tugging her dark veil back in place, Rachel followed Nedwin out of the stable. The building had been cleared for her inspection, so idle stable hands watched as the foursome strode away.

“Is it good news?” Rachel asked as they entered the castle.

“Not sure,” Nedwin replied. “Based on his demeanor, nothing terrible.”

They passed many soldiers on their way up Galloran’s tower. Partway up the winding stairwell, six guards stepped aside to allow Nedwin access to a hefty door bound with iron. Nedwin unlocked it with a key and led the others inside.

Galloran, Ferrin, Nollin, and Kerick awaited them. Galloran wore his blindfold.

“The enigmatic lady in black,” Ferrin greeted with a wry smile.

Rachel pulled her veil aside. “Ha-ha.”

“The title has caught on,” Nollin said smugly.

“Title?” Rachel asked.

“Galloran’s Dark Lady,” Nollin supplied.

Rachel had never heard anyone call her that. But nearly everyone she encountered besides Tark and Io had taken to calling her “milady.”

“That’s a little embarrassing,” Rachel said, taking off her hat.

“It’s statecraft,” Nollin insisted. “We all have roles to play to add legitimacy to the forthcoming campaign. King Galloran is the saintly hero restored to his throne. Nedwin is the fallen but faithful squire reinstated to a position of influence. Kerick and I are the noble lords of the Amar Kabal, here to pledge the support of our people to the cause. Io is the drinling prince whose presence implies the backing of yet another ancient nation.”

“And I’m the dirty secret,” Ferrin said.

Nollin raised a finger in objection. “If your identity as a displacer is ever called into question, you are the turncoat who has provided all the secrets of Maldor’s defenses.”

“What about Tark?” Ferrin inquired.

“The commoner elevated to a station of high responsibility,” Nollin replied smoothly. “Evidence that King Galloran recognizes the vital contributions the common man will make in the upcoming turmoil.”

“Nollin is no stranger to politics,” Galloran said, suppressing a smile. “We are fortunate to have him laboring on our behalf. Copernum and the other

connivers at court have hardly known what to make of him.”

“We all serve where our talents are best suited,” Nollin said humbly, clearly gratified by the praise.

“I have summoned all of you here because we are ready for war,” Galloran announced. “Our host will depart at first light. But two of you must remain behind.”

Nobody spoke.

Rachel glanced at the others. Nollin seemed a natural fit to stay at Trensicourt and play political games. But who else? She didn’t want to end up separated from more of her friends.

“Trensicourt will be left vulnerable in our absence,” Galloran said. “I worry about treachery from within and attacks from without. I will leave enough soldiers to man the wall and the castle, but little more. A skeleton crew, really. To an extent, Trensicourt will have to rely on the strength of her walls and the attention our offensive will demand. Those two elements should suffice if we can prevent the city from collapsing internally.”

“Who is to remain?” Io asked.

“I wish I could bring all of you with me,” Galloran said, “but necessity dictates otherwise. After much consideration I have decided to elevate Nedwin to Duke of Geer and name him regent in my absence, fully empowered to govern the affairs of the kingdom.”

Nedwin paled beneath his freckles. “This is too great an honor, sire. Pray let me remain at your side.”

“No honor is too great for my most faithful servant,” Galloran said. “Your house was stripped of your earldom by Copernum. For that reason I have created a duchy in your name. As much as I detest losing my finest scout as I head into the field, I need a man on the throne who I can trust. Brin must come with me into battle. For laying a siege, his engineering skills may prove essential. Nicholas has the mind for the job but not the body. He will serve as one of your counselors, and his contacts will be at your disposal. Tark lacks experience in affairs of state. Bartley has waffled in the past. And obviously the regent cannot be a seedman or a drinling or a displacer. It must be a man of our kingdom.”

Nedwin looked stricken. “Of course I am yours to command, sire.”

Rachel felt bad that Nedwin seemed so devastated. She would miss him—he had proven himself amazingly reliable. They were all safer with him around. But she had to admit it was probably a good pick. Nobody was more loyal to Galloran.

“The job will not be easy,” Galloran affirmed. “By my mandate Copernum and several of his cronies were preparing to take the field with us. But they have fallen ill, victims of a debilitating fever.”

“Subterfuge,” Nollin grunted. “The coincidence is much too convenient.”

“Copernum knows a variety of recipes to produce such symptoms,” Nedwin added.

“Nevertheless, I cannot force sick men into battle,” Galloran said. “Whatever the cause, the symptoms appear legitimate. We lack the time and the means to expose the charade. I will take the majority of their men, leaving only their household guard. But I need not stress how dangerous these vipers might be to the kingdom once my back is turned.”

“I will protect the kingdom, sire,” Nedwin said.

“I know your feelings toward Copernum,” Galloran said. “They are completely warranted. Do not move against him unprovoked. But should you catch him conspiring, you will have full authority to administer judgment and punishment.”

“As you wish, sire,” Nedwin replied.

“I do not mean to leave you friendless,” Galloran said. “Nollin, you are not mine to command. But given your expertise with statecraft, and given the relationships you have already cultivated here, would you consider remaining with Nedwin to help oversee the kingdom in my absence?”

“Your trust astonishes me,” Nollin replied.

“I know the Amar Kabal to be loyal and true, and I have seen evidence that you are more devoted than most. Some of our ideologies have differed in the past, but I know you do not want to see Maldor lay claim to this kingdom.”

Nollin placed his palms together in his lap. “In truth, my strengths might be better applied to this task than to the siege of Felrook. I will stay if you wish, but please allow me to retain the company and security of my sole countryman.”

Galloran gave a nod. “Three to stay behind instead of two. I hope you will not have need of Kerick’s sword, but I understand the request. And I agree. Nollin, I ask you to serve as a right hand to Nedwin. Watch out for his interests, help him to comprehend the maneuverings of his enemies, and take what action you must to protect the throne and the kingdom.”

“I shall do as you say until your return, King Galloran, or until the campaign ends in ruin. After that I make no pledge.”

“It pains me to miss fighting alongside my people,” Kerick admitted. “Nevertheless, I will remain with Nollin and Nedwin. I vow to protect them

both.”

“I am relieved to have that settled,” Galloran said. “Nedwin, you will be granted the powers of regent in a private ceremony this evening.”

“As you wish, sire,” Nedwin responded.

He was saying the right words, but Rachel could tell that Nedwin was disappointed about the assignment. She supposed Galloran could tell as well, though he offered no indication. It was hard to blame Nedwin. Staying in Trensicourt surrounded by plotting enemies would be no fun at all.

“I have had eagles from the Amar Kabal and the drinlings,” Galloran said. “Both stand ready to march on Felrook. We will coordinate our marches so that we arrive together.”

“What of the other kingdoms?” Ferrin wondered.

“A major insurrection is planned in Meridon,” Galloran said. “It will begin tomorrow and might bring us some fighting men in time, though the revolt will probably prove more valuable as a distraction. I suppose at this late stage I can reveal that Vernon rescued the syllable guardian Trivett from the Isle of Weir, and they will be involved with the uprising.

“Minor mischief has been planned in a few other kingdoms. To my surprise, a group of four hundred treefolk are currently marching to our aid. They should join us before we reach Felrook.”

“The treefolk have never left the jungle,” Nollin said in surprise.

“The treefolk have never had more reason to care for matters outside their borders,” Galloran said. “Through Esmira in the past, and now through Ulani, they have been kept informed of the relevance of our plight. Even so, four hundred is only token support. They could make a much more significant difference if they dared.”

Nollin nodded. “We’re fortunate to have any of their aid. I had time to observe them. They may not be quite as effective outside their native jungles, but the treefolk are serious warriors.”

“They have been strengthened by hardship,” Nedwin said. “They were invaded and nearly wiped out by Zokar. And deep in the heart of the jungle they must contend with fearsome predators that most of us can scarcely imagine.”

“My business is complete,” Galloran said. “Ferrin has some news.”

All eyes turned to the displacer.

“Jason has done an excellent job of keeping my ear away from delicate conversations. A prudent practice, given my background, although the

precaution limits our knowledge of how their mission is progressing.”

“We know they hijacked an interceptor at Durna,” Nollin remarked. “The empire is astir over it.”

“We know more than that,” Ferrin said. “I overheard a conversation today. I believe my ear was packed away in Jason’s cabin aboard the ship, less bundled than normally, and he forgot that I might overhear as he entered conversing with Drake.”

“What’s the news?” Rachel asked.

“Jason and the others have reached Windbreak Island. They have confronted the Maumet, losing a number of drinlings in the process. They found the guardian virtually invincible, but I take heart that some of them survived the encounter. They are currently developing strategies to engage it.”

“How does the timing of their progress synchronize with our attack?” Nollin asked.

“We have to trust the oracle,” Galloran said. “She informed us when to begin our assignments. We complied. How long their quest takes will depend on the hardships they face and how far they must travel to reach the abode of Darian the Seer.”

“Unknowable variables,” Nollin agreed.

Galloran stood. “We all have arrangements to make for tomorrow. I will counsel with Nedwin, Nollin, and Kerick tonight after Nedwin is officially appointed regent. Thank you all for your service.”

Rachel replaced her wide-brimmed hat and arranged the dark veil over her face. She left the room behind Nedwin and walked down the stairs. Was she really about to go to war? With real battles? How much would the others be counting on her? Galloran often talked like her Edomic skills would provide them with an important advantage. Even though she had built up her endurance, she could only make a limited number of people freeze up or flop to the ground at a time. There were only so many flaming tables she could throw before running out of juice.

As panic threatened to unbalance her, she told herself to take it one step at a time. War was coming. It would be ugly. But it wouldn’t start today. There was no point in losing her grip yet. What could she do right now? What preparations did she have to make? Not many. She had chosen her horse. Her gear would be prepped by others. She supposed she should go practice her Edomic.

At the bottom of the stairs, the group dispersed in different directions. Rachel noticed Nedwin walking down a lonely corridor, head slightly bowed.

He staggered a little before disappearing around a corner.

"I was glad to hear Lord Jason remains alive," Tark was telling Io. "Not surprised, mind you. It will take more than a Maumet to stop him, mark my words. There's more to him than greets the eye. He'll find a way to enter the Celestine Library or I've never touched a sousalax."

"Wait here for me," Rachel said.

"Here?" Io questioned.

"I'll be quick," Rachel promised. "I just remembered something I need to ask Nedwin in private."

Tark folded his arms. "Begging your pardon, milady, you shouldn't go wandering off without—"

"We're in the castle. I'll only be a moment." She was already hurrying after Nedwin. She reached the bend in the hall in time to see him proceeding up a stairwell. She didn't get much of a look, but he no longer appeared particularly despondent. Maybe she was jumping at shadows, imagining how she would feel if she learned she would have to govern an entire kingdom.

Still she followed him, just in case. At the top of the stairs she found a quiet hall. Nedwin sat on the floor, back to the wall, elbows on his knees, both hands in his unruly red hair.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He glanced over at her. "I heard someone following me. I thought it was you. I just need some time. You should go make ready for tomorrow."

"I'm ready," Rachel said. "I don't mean to intrude."

He lowered his hands, placing both palms on one knee. "I appreciate the interest. You're kind."

Rachel assumed that was the closest she would get to an invitation. She walked toward him. "Are you worried about serving as regent?"

He exhaled sharply. She thought the gust was intended as a chuckle. "An honor I did not seek and which I do not desire. Did you know that I have almost no fears left in me?"

"You're definitely not afraid of heights."

"I don't fear fire or water or starvation. I'm not afraid to fight. I fear no man or beast. I fear no illness. No punishment. No torture. I'm not afraid to die, Rachel. Part of me would welcome the release."

"You shouldn't talk that way," Rachel said.

He ignored the comment. "I have troubling dreams. I dislike my dreams. Aside from the tricks my mind plays when I sleep, I only have two fears left.



Would you like to know what they are?"

"Okay."

"I'm afraid for King Galloran. I want to keep him safe. And I'm afraid of disappointing King Galloran. This opportunity to serve as regent will separate me from him. I will not be able to protect him. And I will be in a position to fail him."

"I'm sure you'll do great."

"I'm glad one of us feels confident. Rachel, through dark years that I would prefer to forget, I clung to the idea of Galloran. Trensicourt was not worth all I suffered. Not even freedom from tyranny was worth it. But that man was worth all I endured and more. I failed him when he was captured. I only survived in the hope that Galloran would need me. And he does. But I won't be with him."

"I'll be with him," Rachel said. "I'll keep him safe."

His eyes snapped to hers. "Swear it."

Rachel swallowed dryly. Suddenly she had to confront how far she would go in order to fulfill her words. The thought of her protecting Galloran seemed almost silly. He was the best swordsman in Lyrian. But it obviously mattered to Nedwin. He actually seemed to think her protection could make a difference. She imagined a soldier attacking Galloran from behind. Would she allow that? "I promise, Nedwin. I promise to watch over him. I love him too. I'll die to protect him if necessary."

His posture relaxed a little. "That is good to hear. Yours is no small gift, and he will keep you close." Nedwin sighed. "We have come upon hard times if I am the man he selects as regent."

"He couldn't choose anyone more loyal," Rachel argued.

"But he could find many more polished, more schooled in politics. Less scarred. Less damaged. Sometimes I can feel my mind unraveling. Once I was something of a social creature. No longer. I prefer solitude. I'm a good scout. Great, even. I don't expect I'll make much of a regent."

"But you'll do it?"

"If I refuse, I'll have failed him already. I would give anything not to fail him."

"You'll have help from Nollin and Nicholas," Rachel reminded him.

"I'll be forced to lean on them," Nedwin agreed. "Much as they would lean on me out in the wilderness, where I belong."

"You'll be terrific," Rachel encouraged. "The fact that you care so much makes you the perfect person for the job. Much better than some overconfident

politician.”

“Let’s hope for the sake of the realm that there is sense in your words. I’m relieved to know you’ll be watching out for my king.”

“We’ll all be watching out for him. Nobody wants to see Galloran harmed. But I’ll make a special effort. I’ll try to do what you would do.”

Nedwin closed his eyes. “Thank you, Rachel. The thought affords me a measure of comfort. Can I give you anything?” Pulling on the leather strands around his neck, Nedwin produced several vials from within his shirt. “I’ve collected unusual substances from the far corners of Lyrian—expensive extracts, rare and useful. Pain enhancers, poisons, healing ointments.”

“You keep them,” Rachel said. “Carrying poison would freak me out. We should rely on our strengths. Mine is Edomic.”

Nedwin nodded, eyes remote. “Mine is stealth, I suppose. And commitment. I don’t suppose I could be more committed.”

“That might be exactly what this kingdom needs.”

Nedwin stood. With him seated, she had almost forgotten how abnormally tall he was. “Enough wallowing. I’ll escort you back to your bodyguards.”

“I can find my way.”

“Let me guide you. It’s one of my strengths.”

# THE MAUMET

As the *Valiant* gently swayed and creaked, Jason sat in his cabin studying the prophecy. While reading and pondering, he munched on a thick burrito improvised out of flatbread and fish meat. Sunlight streamed through the porthole. Since she had memorized the prophecy, Farfalee had written down all the words spoken by the oracle, so that he could examine them. Jason had been insistent, because he felt their current plan would get them all killed.

After much debate, their best strategy involved circling the island, leaving a number of landing parties offshore at different points. A pair of squads at the far end of the island from the library would go ashore first, not advancing too far inland. If the Maumet attacked them, they would detonate an orantium sphere. At the sound of the explosion, squads would move in from the north and south to further delay and distract the Maumet. Teams on the eastern side of the island would race to the library in order to get the information and escape before the Maumet returned and killed them all. Jason, Farfalee, Aram, Jasher, and Drake would be members of the eastern teams.

That plan outclassed the others mostly because it sought to dodge the Maumet rather than defeat it. It amounted to a high-stakes game of steal the bacon. But the strategy had many flaws.

Farfalee had warned that it might take hours, days, or even weeks to find the desired information, depending how effectively the enormous library was indexed. Any major delay in finding the location of Darian the Seer could result in a fatal confrontation with the Maumet. Furthermore, the plan assumed that the Maumet would react to multiple intrusions by storming around the island and battling all the trespassers. However, if the Maumet was smart and meant to guard the library, it might react to the invasion by falling back to the library and slaying all comers.

Jason felt certain that if the plan was implemented, they would fail to get the information, and they would all die. Quest over. War lost. Just because their current strategy was the best they had devised did not make it the right plan.

They would be relying on stupidity from the Maumet and a whole lot of luck finding the information swiftly.

Rubbing his eyes, Jason tried to force his strained imagination to deliver better options. The oracle had seen a way they could succeed. The thought would not quit pestering him. Out of all the possible futures, there had to be one where they survived the Maumet. There had to be a strategy that would work. They simply hadn't found it yet.

Jason stared at the freshly drafted parchment. Farfalee had warned that prophecies seldom gave many specifics. They did not lead you step by step, strategy by strategy, to your desired end. But Jason didn't need a full explanation of how to handle every upcoming problem. He just needed a clue.

Most of the words were inapplicable. Much of the prophecy specified who should go where and when. Much of it dealt with Galloran's attack of Felrook. He focused on the lines that seemed to have the most relevance.

*The last abode of Darian the Seer can be learned at the Celestine Library within the Inland Sea.* The line referenced this part of the quest, but lacked details pertaining to their current problem. Jason knew where he needed to go. The trouble was how to get there.

Several utterances toward the end contained some potentially useful statements. *The parallel quests must succeed. Many present will perish. You must stand united.* Maybe many of them had to die in order to get the info from the library. Maybe by working together and sacrificing heavily they could pull it off. That line of thinking supported the current plan.

The most mysterious and potentially useful predictions were among her final words. *A secret from the past can ransom the future.* That seemed to hint that the information they would get from the seer could help them win the war. But maybe it meant a secret from the past could teach them how to defeat the Maumet and access the library. Farfalee, Jasher, and Drake had all lived a long time. Maybe one of them had forgotten an important detail.

*The servant will betray the master.* That one was hard to pin down. It could refer to anyone. Was it possible that the Maumet would betray Zokar and allow them access to the library? Was there some way to appease the guardian and win it over? The prospect didn't seem likely, but Jason was ready to consider any option.

*The pleasant paths have crumbled. Lyrian must be purchased with sacrifice.* Those lines seemed to justify throwing lots of people at the Maumet from different directions and hoping a few survivors would escape with the information. But

Jason still disliked that plan. He couldn't picture any survivors. Sacrifice might be essential to their success, but success would not automatically spring from reckless, wasteful sacrifices.

The last lines sounded more like clues than any other part. *Our hope is red, like the blood of heroes; black as the bowels of the earth; and white, like a flash of orantium.* The mention of blood seemed to once again emphasize sacrifice. Jason found the other two lines more intriguing.

The bowels of the earth could refer to caves. What if a secret cave granted access to the library? Perhaps a cave that started underwater or had an entrance hidden on the island? A secret tunnel that would let them sneak to their goal unnoticed?

Although he considered the possibility worth mentioning to the others, the idea failed to spark much excitement in him. If an entrance like that existed, it had stayed hidden for hundreds of years. It would be extremely hard to find. And the only reason to believe it might exist was a vague hunch. The line in the prophecy could easily refer to something else entirely. It might just mean a black object. Or the line might have nothing to do with this portion of the quest. Besides, just because they gained access to the library by a secret way didn't ensure the Maumet wouldn't catch them. The guardian had no visible eyes or ears. If it was like a lurker, the Maumet might notice their presence with more than the five normal senses. But a hidden passage would be much better than a wild game of capture the flag.

What was white like an orantium flash? That kind of intense bright white was only really available from an orantium flash. What else came close? Sunlight on snow? Maybe an angel? Jason doubted a choir of angels would swoop down and rescue them.

Could orantium itself be the key? If the Maumet was made of iron when impact occurred, the answer was no. Jasher had hit it with orantium to no effect. But what if the Maumet had been made of tooth enamel when the orantium had detonated? The explosion might have pulverized it. The tooth fairy would have been cleaning up bits and pieces for weeks.

Was there a way to ensure the Maumet would be made of a fragile substance when the orantium hit? Strategically, tooth enamel had been an odd choice. The Maumet had been hit by iron weapons before it touched the tooth. It could have turned to iron at the start. It seemed to have selected tooth enamel out of curiosity. The others speculated that it had only assimilated the torivorian steel once it felt seriously threatened.

Would the Maumet feel threatened at the start of any conflict from here on out? After the skirmish, it had experimented with different substances, becoming skin and leather and iron. If they could just hit the guardian with orantium when it was fragile, the problem might be solved.

Jason resisted crumpling the parchment. Was he dwelling too much on orantium because it was their best weapon? The prophecy seemed to suggest orantium would be important, but it had already served them well. And certainly it would be important as Galloran attacked Felrook.

The Maumet could transform instantly. What if they threw an explosive sphere, and the Maumet changed to crystal as the globe connected? It would be blasted into glitter. Might the Maumet arbitrarily change into crystal on contact? Or was it too smart? The Maumet had lived a long time. It knew how to survive.

What if they attacked it with crystal weapons? Or weapons made of a brittle substance? Then if at any point the Maumet transformed into the brittle material, they would bombard it with orantium. The others had considered a similar strategy. But it relied on the Maumet being stupid. The creature had shown a single hint of recklessness. The Maumet had become tooth enamel and had lost a foot as a result. Could banking on a similar mistake be their best hope? Was that realistic?

What would be the ideal material for the Maumet to become? Glass? Crystal? Jason chuckled. Orantium would be nice. It would blast itself into nothing. But there was no way to even bring the creature in contact with orantium. Once exposed to air or water, the mineral immediately exploded. After a globe broke, the mineral would detonate before contact.

Wait.

There was an exception.

For the first time in quite a while, Jason found himself unable to resist a smile.

\* \* \*

Within two hours they were ready to implement the plan. Gripping a collapsible spyglass in both hands, Jason felt he might burst with nervous excitement.

The tensest moment so far had come when Thag had rowed the bucket of orantium goo away from the *Valiant*. A single orantium globe was submerged inside the bucket, and he had crushed the sphere with a gloved hand.

He hadn't blown up.

Now a team of three drinlings was aboard a launch, rowing toward shore. Sails angled to make use of the light breeze, the *Valiant* was sailing away to the east in order to put some distance between the ship and the possible explosion. If a little pebble of orantium could blow apart a mangler, and a piece the size of a racquetball could demolish a castle gate, how big would the bang be if this plan worked?

Among other concerns, Jason was seriously worried that if the trick succeeded, Thag and the other two drinlings going ashore might wish it hadn't. Although the landing party was supposed to try to row away before the fireworks began, the drinling squad was very likely on a kamikaze mission.

As the ship glided farther from the shore, Jason watched the mission unfold through his spyglass. Framed within the magnified circle, the Maumet appeared on the beach before the launch landed. It looked to be made of stone, but it was hard to be sure. It might have been gray wood.

The tall figure held still as the launch landed. After securing the launch in the shallows, two of the drinlings splashed forward and attacked the Maumet. Thag hung back with the bucket of goo containing the orantium pebble.

Dodging a blow from a long arm, one of the drinlings slammed the Maumet with a mace, but the creature immediately turned to iron, taking no damage. Body shrieking, the Maumet brutally dispatched the drinling. Thag and the other fighter retreated hastily to the launch, leaving the bucket on the beach near the water.

The idea was to make the bucket look accidentally abandoned. Selling the ploy had already cost one life and might cost two more. Thag and the other drinling rowed away from the beach at maximum speed.

The Maumet stalked up and down the beach near the water, iron joints squealing. Then it paced over to the fallen drinling. Crouching, the Maumet extended a hand and changed color.

"Bronze," Farfalee said, peering through her own telescope. "He touched the ring."

Each of the drinlings had worn a few trinkets of diverse materials in case they fell in combat, to hopefully get the Maumet in a mood to sample substances. Jason knew the transformation was a good sign.

"Now obsidian," Farfalee reported as the Maumet became a glossy black. "The pendant. And now brass, the buckle on his knife belt. It went for everything we planted. Now it's moving toward the bucket."

"We can see that much without lenses," Drake murmured.

Jason swiveled his attention to Thag and the other drinling. Was the other survivor called Fo? Or had that been Fo back on the beach? They continued to row hard and had already put a fair amount of distance between themselves and the shore. Jason aimed the spyglass back at the Maumet.

Standing upright, brass body partially reflecting the water and the white sand, the creature stood over the abandoned bucket. Crouching, the Maumet touched the side of the bucket and turned to brown wood.

Jason held his breath.

“It’s reaching into the bucket,” Farfalee announced.

Jason lowered his spyglass, worried about the flash. Thag and the other drinling fell flat in the launch. Jason crouched, barely peeking over the side of the ship. Would it happen?

“He’s thinking about it,” Aram narrated hopefully.

Jason covered his ears, watching through squinted eyes. Would it happen? Would it happen?

Flaring a brilliant white, the Maumet erupted violently—a large primary blast followed by an enormous secondary explosion. The tremendous detonation sent vast quantities of sand and seawater spewing skyward. The concussion wave heaved water and sand outward and made the ship lurch, knocking Jason onto his backside. Even with his ears covered, the thunderous roar was painfully loud.

Regaining his feet, squinting as a peppering of debris began to rain down, Jason marveled at the steam and smoke mushrooming up from the blast site. Seawater surged to fill the gaping void of the blackened crater. Most of the white sand beach was simply gone, along with a great deal of the vegetation behind it.

The plan had worked! The Maumet had taken the bait, temporarily becoming orantium until the immediate consequence followed.

Thag and the other drinling stood up in the launch, pumping their fists in the air. Raucous cheering broke out aboard the *Valiant*. Drake hugged Farfalee, lifting her off her feet and twirling her around. Drinlings pantomimed the explosion and pointed at the churning smoke above the devastated beach.

Jasher clapped Jason on the back. “You just saved us all.”

Jason could barely understand the words, because his ears were still ringing. “We owe the drinlings who delivered the orantium.”

“They deserve thanks and praise,” Jasher agreed. “But the idea had to come first. You’re quite the trickster.”



“I’ll second that,” Aram exclaimed as heartily as his small frame would allow. “I’ll take cleverness over strength every time!”

Farfalee embraced Jason tightly. “You marvelous, brilliant boy!”

He had never seen Farfalee so unreserved. Nor Drake smiling so broadly. Jason hugged her back, enjoying the triumph of the moment.

Others pressed to congratulate him. Everyone was jubilant. The crew seemed even happier than when they had escaped the harbor. Hats were thrown high, some of them landing in the sea.

Jason realized that the threat of the Maumet had been hanging over them more heavily than any other concern. From the outset they had all known that this obstacle would probably end their lives. But now they had destroyed it with relatively few casualties. One massive blast and the threat had been vaporized.

Whooping and shouting along with the others, Jason managed to lose himself in the moment. There might be plenty of hardship still ahead of them, but right now they had a worthy cause for celebration.

# LIBRARY

Once the celebration over the demise of the Maumet subsided, the next phase of planning began. All agreed that haste was a top priority. They needed to secure the information from the library before the opportunity vanished. Even if the imperial forces of the Inland Sea did not know their current position, the tower of smoke rising into the atmosphere would be visible for many miles around. A number of vessels were likely to notice.

Within an hour Aram had the *Valiant* anchored off the eastern coast of Windbreak Island, just south of the new crater. Two launches made for shore, eight passengers in each, including Jason, Farfalee, Jasher, Drake, Aram, Nia, Heg, and a very pale and weary Corinne.

After landing on a strip of beige sand, Corinne flopped onto the beach, facedown, arms spread wide, as if trying to embrace the ground. Breathing deeply, she held the pose for a long moment. Jason squatted beside her, and she raised her head to look at him. Particles of sand clung to her lips, nose, and chin. Her face was ashen, with dark smudges under her eyes. Even worn out and sick, she remained pretty.

“Does it feel good to be back on land?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m better already. Not all the way back yet. Might take a little time. The warm sand feels divine. I almost feel like eating something on purpose.”

“We’ll have to be fast,” Jason said.

“Don’t you dare,” Corinne scolded.

“Our enemies could catch up any minute,” Jason explained.

“I know.”

“Farfalee said the research might take days.”

“I like her.”

Jason saw that the others were ready to move out. A pair of drinlings had been assigned to guard Corinne. “I have to go.”

“Take your time. I’ll come find you when I feel better.”

“Such a nice beach,” Jason said, looking up and down the narrow stretch of sand. “It would be a shame to barf all over it.”

Corinne threw a handful of sand at him. He could tell she was already feeling more like herself.

Jasher strode over to Corinne and laid the sheathed torivorian sword on the sand beside her. “This belongs with you.”

“Thanks. You’re welcome to take it.”

The seedman shook his head. “I have my own sword. I want you properly armed.”

Another group of drinlings was heading toward the beach in the skiff that had trailed the *Valiant* out of Durna. “What are they up to?” Jason asked.

“Foraging,” Jasher said. “You know how much food the drinlings require. They thought it wise to fill the hold while they have the chance.”

“I hope they find stuff we can eat too,” Jason muttered.

“We’ll be all right,” Jasher replied. “The *Valiant* was well provisioned when we took it. The drinlings have left the best stores for us.”

Jason followed Drake and Jasher off the beach and into the vegetation. There were thick shrubs, some with big, glossy leaves, and tall palm trees. Before visiting Mianamon, Jason might have labeled it a jungle, but the plant life was tame compared to the southern rain forest. The absence of suffocating humidity and carnivorous plants was appreciated.

Although this forest was not draped with vines or teeming with wildlife, the foliage did screen the library from view as Drake and Jasher paralleled a burbling rivulet up the slope. After Jason pushed through ferny limbs for his first clear view of the Celestine Library, he stopped and stared.

The massive structure was magnificent. The overall impression was of multiple blocky buildings and thick towers inventively piled together to form a single elaborate complex. Seven domes were now currently in view, some higher or larger than others, all decorated with elaborate scrollwork and gilded patterns. Their staggered arrangement suggested there might be a few lower domes on the far side as well. Many huge windows and skylights interrupted the exotic masonry. Elevated walkways connected some of the towers. Arches and colonnades abounded. The vast library possessed little symmetry, hugging the sloped terrain like packages artfully arranged on a stairway.

“It’s amazing,” Jason said as Farfalee emerged from the brush behind him. “These guys took their libraries seriously.”

“Think of all the knowledge inside,” Farfalee said. “The texts on Edomic alone make this the greatest treasure house in Lyrian.”

“It has held up well,” Jason noticed. Although the tremendous building seemed ancient, there was no apparent damage. No tumbled towers or cracked domes or even broken windows.

“This library was built to last by the best wizards and craftsmen of an enlightened age,” Farfalee said. “The structure is fortified with Edomic. Protective mandates are expertly woven into the thick stone walls, the foundation, the wood, the glass, the furnishings, even the surrounding earth. Otherwise, the library would lie in ruins by now.”

“Some similar sites have been spoiled by intruders over the years,” Aram added. “Here, the Maumet kept away treasure hunters and vandals.”

Farfalee started toward the Celestine Library across a field of feathery brush broken up by crooked sheets of jagged stone. Shorebirds circled and squawked overhead. As Jason advanced through the brush, small hopping insects cleared out of the way. At first he thought they were grasshoppers, but closer inspection showed they had eight legs and a vaguely crablike shape.

A generous plaza preceded the main entrance to the library. None of the flagstones was broken. No weeds sprouted up through cracks. A stone balustrade enclosed the area, with empty stone planters spaced at intervals, and statuary in the corners. A huge, dry fountain dominated the plaza’s center. No fewer than twenty cherubic statues frolicked in the basin and on the shelves descending from the parched spout. All the marble toddlers had chubby features and dimpled joints.

On the far side of the plaza, thirty stone steps swept up to a massive, arched entrance. Giants would feel small in front of the heavy doors.

Farfalee led the group across the plaza and up the steps. Their footfalls seemed too loud. Several of the drinlings looked around disconcertedly, with weapons drawn. Jason did not blame them. The exterior of the library seemed too lavish to be so lifeless.

Farfalee paused before a set of double doors more than three times her height.

“No knobs, handles, or keyholes,” Aram observed. He spoke softly, as he might at the entrance to a church.

“Solid,” Heg noted.

Farfalee nodded distractedly. “We would fail if we sought entry by force.” She placed her fingertips on the door and spoke an Edomic phrase.

As always with Edomic, Jason sensed the meaning without being able to pinpoint the individual words. It was always tricky to translate Edomic into English. Farfalee had basically asked the doors to open for a seeker of illumination.

Quiet as a drop of water sliding down a window pane, the massive doors swung inward, slowly and evenly, revealing an expansive lobby. A polished marble floor extended before them, seamless and swirling with slightly metallic colors. Light streamed in from various windows and shone from luminous stones on the walls. The air felt still and old without smelling musty.

“You knew the password?” Jason asked.

“I did not command with Edomic,” Farfalee clarified. “Simple words and phrases are used to trigger preset commands in buildings such as this. I used what was once considered the standard Edomic solicitation for entry to a storehouse of learning. I was worried that the doors might be sealed by Edomic commands or that powerful wards might shield the building. Had that been the case, entry might have been close to impossible for any besides Maldor himself. But no special defenses had been engaged. The doors probably would have responded to any number of polite Edomic requests for admittance.”

“Will there be safeguards beyond the doors?” Aram wondered.

“Definitely,” Farfalee said. “Be forewarned—do not attempt to force doors in a place such as this. Some rooms or wings may be protected by powerful and even deadly commands. If a door is locked, let me be the judge of whether we should attempt to pass. Also, do not browse the collection. A repository of this renown will contain many traps, including books designed to harm the patron who opens them.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“Much of the knowledge here could be dangerous. Those who created and managed the library feared the collection falling into unenlightened hands. Hence, safeguards were installed. I know most of the clues that mark harmful books. Speaking generally, don’t remove any of the texts from the library. Not a single page. And don’t touch any of the art, weapons, or treasure that you see. Nearly any item of that sort will be rigged to unleash catastrophe.”

“There will be treasure?” Aram asked, his voice pained. “And weapons? And we can’t touch them?”

“Certainly not any of the pieces on display,” Farfalee emphasized. “Nothing hanging on the walls, decorating the tables, or featured in niches. If in doubt, ask me.”

Heg whistled softly. "Should some of us wait here at the doors?"

Farfalee gave a nod. "That might be a wise position for anyone lacking a particular assignment. I recommend that Aram lead a party to the top of the highest dome to keep lookout. Unless I am mistaken, the vantage will be outfitted with an array of optical enhancers. I'll keep Jasher, Drake, Jason, and Nia with me, to assist in my research."

"All right," Aram said. "Three with me. The rest man the door."

Farfalee led Jason, Drake, Jasher, and Nia through the entryway and into the lobby. High above, one of the smaller domes capped the vast chamber, perhaps forty yards across. The murals on the walls looked freshly painted. The lower murals depicted underwater scenes with exotic fish swimming among sharks, squids, eels, and other aquatic predators. Higher murals featured wizards on land, harnessing the elements to attack cities, combat armies, and battle monsters. The paintings and carvings on the domed ceiling showed clouds at sunset, birds, and a variety of fanciful winged creatures.

"I thought the Repository of Learning was big," Jason said, head craned back. "It was just a tiny satellite branch."

"Only two other libraries in Lyrian ever rivaled this one," Farfalee said. "Before abandoning us, Eldrin demolished both of them, together with several lesser repositories and the former residences of many wizards. Only the Celestine Library has remained untouched."

"I suppose we can thank the Maumet for something," Jasher said.

"I consider the guardian much easier to thank now that it has scattered on the wind," Drake remarked.

Three large archways led out of the impressive lobby—one directly across from the entrance, one to the left, and one to the right. All the archways had strange characters engraved above them.

Farfalee walked purposefully toward the archway across from the entrance. "We should find the index records this way. Dare I hope that some of the guides have survived?"

"Guides?" Jason asked. "As in workers? Librarians?"

"Not living guides," Farfalee explained. "No loremasters or historians would have survived these secluded centuries. The guides principally assisted in cataloging these larger libraries. They were Edomic constructs, not living, but brimming with information."

"Like computers," Jason said.

Farfalee looked at him blankly.

“In the Beyond, our libraries have complicated machines with information about all the books.”

“Your computers might serve a similar function,” Farfalee said. “But the guides are not mechanical. Nor are they truly sentient. Some nearly possess the illusion of life thanks to complex Edomic workmanship. Certain wizards devoted their careers to such projects.”

They passed beneath the archway into a short hall. Along either side, heavy doors alternated with arched recesses housing stately busts. Instead of ending, the hall became a downward stairway, not steep, but quite long. It took fifty steps to reach the landing. Farfalee ignored the doors there and descended another long flight. And another. Jason realized that, as immense as the library had appeared from outside, much more of it was concealed underground.

The stairs deposited them in a tubular room that looked like the inside of a long barrel. No sunlight reached this deep place, and the stones in the walls glowed dimly, leaving much of the room in shadow. A counter stretched from wall to wall, restricting access. Behind the counter, rows of tall shelves extended into the distance. The smell of leather and old paper saturated the air.

“Look at all those books!” Nia exclaimed.

“This is merely the index,” Farfalee said. “If we can’t find any guidestones, we’ll search here by hand.”

Jason gawked in despair at the endless shelves. How many of those thick tomes would they have to examine simply to find the right area to begin their search?

Drake stretched his arms over his head and grimaced. “I think this is where I wander off and go for a swim.”

Farfalee glared at him.

“Let me rephrase,” Drake tried. “My instincts warn that I had best hasten to the beach to help keep watch.”

Placing both hands on the countertop, Farfalee kicked her legs sideways and vaulted it nimbly. “Don’t lose heart,” she said, scanning the rear of the counter. “A facility of this quality would ordinarily boast any number of— Here we are!”

Farfalee crouched behind the counter and came up with a wooden tray of hemispheric stones. After placing the tray on the counter, Farfalee selected a blue hemisphere with light green veins.

Cupping the stone in her hand, she spoke in conversational Edomic without commanding intent, and a bluish, translucent man appeared beside her.

Wearing a breastplate and helm, a hefty sword at his waist, the spectral figure stood tall, with broad shoulders and brawny limbs.

He greeted Farfalee in Edomic. She asked a question. Something about what other languages he could speak. Jason found that as he attempted to focus on the individual words they spoke, his comprehension grew muddled. He understood better when he only paid casual attention.

“Did she have to pick the dashing soldier?” Jasher grumbled.

“My sister has an eerie sense for these things,” Drake replied, suppressing a grin.

“I don’t mind the choice,” Nia chimed in, sizing up the ghostly soldier appreciatively.

Pausing from her conversation, Farfalee turned to the others. “This should dramatically accelerate the search. Meet Tibrus. He is one of more than a hundred guides at our disposal.”

“Do the others look like him?” Nia wondered innocently.

“If so,” Jasher mumbled to Drake, “I may join you for that swim.”

Farfalee rolled her eyes. “If I have a knack for finding attractive males, as my husband perhaps you should find the implied compliment.”

“Do they only speak Edomic?” Jason asked. He had missed the answer about languages.

“Our current common tongue was in use well before this library became inaccessible,” Farfalee replied. “The scholars of my youth worked hard to obscure certain knowledge by expressing it in Edomic. But many guides are capable of conversing in other languages if I first issue Edomic instructions to unlock the ability.”

“I’ll take one of those,” Drake said. “My Edomic is out of practice.”

Farfalee arched an eyebrow. “Ironic, since you unlawfully employ the language to ignite your cooking fires.”

“I prefer to concentrate on the useful words,” Drake answered. “I hold few academic conversations with campfires.”

“Have you asked Tibrus if he knows where we can learn about Darian?” Nia inquired.

“I did. Tibrus specializes in medicine, the arts, and the strategy of warfare. But he told me where we can find several guides with rich backgrounds in history.”

Farfalee thanked Tibrus in Edomic and set down his stone. The instant her fingers lost contact with the hemisphere, the wispy soldier vanished. She ducked



behind the counter and came back up holding a small iron strongbox with a keyhole in the front. After setting down the heavy box, she moved along the counter a few paces, crouched again, and produced the key.

“These are some of the more expert guides,” Farfalee explained, unlocking the container. “Since the library is vacant, Tibrus was kind enough to tell me where to locate the key.”

“These guides are better than the others?” Jason checked.

“History is by far the largest section of the collection,” Farfalee explained. “Tibrus warned that the expert guides can be trickier to handle, which was my experience centuries ago in the Great Document Hall at Elboreth. The experts are designed to carefully match the seeker of knowledge to appropriate volumes. They will steer the unworthy away from the weightier texts.”

“Then why use the experts?” Nia asked.

Farfalee took six stones from the strongbox and placed them in a row on the counter. “If we knew the name of the book we desire, any guide would suffice. But I have no idea what tome will inform us about the most recent abode of Darian the Seer. So our best chance will be to solicit an expert who can suggest how to locate that information. We must impress them and win them over. Jasher, would you prefer Edomic or common?”

He winced a little. “I’m more comfortable with common.”

“It won’t help your credibility,” Farfalee cautioned.

“Neither will poor speech,” Jasher said.

“Very well,” Farfalee conceded.

“Why don’t you consult the experts one by one, Failie?” Drake asked.

“Partly due to time,” Farfalee replied. “Partly because the experts have varied personalities. Some prefer men to women. If necessary, I will solicit all of them personally. For the present we should share the task.” She tapped four of the stones in turn, muttering a phrase about common speech each time. “You may each select one and see what you can learn.”

Jason picked a cloudy white stone with fiery orange flecks. It felt smooth, cool, and somewhat heavier than it looked.

Farfalee told them the word they should speak to activate the stone. Jason felt a little nervous, because Edomic commands had never worked for him like they had for Rachel. But in this instance he just needed to pronounce the word correctly, not pour his will into the command to demand compliance.

Trying to match her inflection, Jason repeated the summons Farfalee had shared, and the stone instantly hummed in his hand and grew perceptibly

warmer. A bald man with a hook nose and thin eyebrows appeared, leaning on a cane, his skin and clothes a luminous white.

“Common tongue, is it?” he said, sounding a bit cranky.

“It’s my native language,” Jason explained defensively.

The old guy waved a dismissive hand. “What a sorry state of affairs. Native tongue, you say? The current common speech does not even originate from our world, lad. It comes from the Beyond.”

“I know,” Jason said. “So do I.”

This surprised the old guy. “You hail from the Beyond? Then you know the country our common speech is named after.”

“England.”

“Correct.” The ghostly figure suddenly seemed more friendly. “Do you know how English came to be our common tongue?”

“From the Beyonders who came here?”

“The Beyonders planted the first seeds. There were many factors involved. The primary culprits were wizards. The wizards of Lyrian have long been fascinated with Beyonders. Some wizards have even traveled to the Beyond. Since English was utterly foreign to this world, a number of powerful wizards began using it for secret communication, both in writing and in speech. As the trend grew, the study of English became second only to Edomic for many wizards. Consequently, even outside the society of wizards, many of the learned and wise adopted the practice.

“Of the two languages favored by the wise, English was easier to master. And so interest in it increased. English became synonymous with learning and power. Diverse cultures spoke their own languages, and English besides. In time, English provided a means to converse across cultural boundaries. Gradually, English became firmly established as the common tongue of Lyrian. As an increasing number of children learned it from the cradle, English also became the primary language of many cultures.”

“You know a lot,” Jason said.

“It is my calling,” the old man answered pleasantly. “Under most circumstances I would consider the use of English inelegant, but the opportunity to converse with a native speaker of a Beyondic tongue is indeed an honor. What brings you to these hallowed halls of learning?”

“A single question, really,” Jason said. “I’m looking for the last home of Darian the Seer.”

The old man burst into laughter. Not brief laughter. The mirthful condition persisted long enough to make Jason feel awkward. The old guide partly got himself under control, then started up again, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Why is that funny?” Jason asked.

“My apologies, my young Beyonder. For how long have you inhabited our world?”

“Several months, now. Less than a year.”

“And already you’ve turned treasure seeker?”

“I’m not a treasure hunter,” Jason said. “I need information.”

The old man nodded. “Information that will lead you to Darian’s fabled treasure.”

“No. I need information from Darian.”

“My boy, surely you are aware that Darian must have died ages ago.”

This was not news to Jason. Not long after hearing the prophecy, Farfalee had explained that Darian should have died well before even she was born. “Are we sure he’s dead?” Jason asked the guide. “Was it confirmed? Did anyone find a body?”

The old man made a disappointed face. “Are you one of those?”

“One of what?”

“I thought we had seen the last of them.”

“The last of who?”

The guide considered Jason shrewdly. “How much do you know about the question you are asking?”

“Not a lot. But I was told by a trusted source that Darian has information for me.”

The guide narrowed his eyes. “How trusted is the source?”

Jason glanced over at Farfalee, who was conversing with a short, plump woman. “Hey, Farfalee. How much can I tell him?”

“Ask a guide to keep a conversation private and it will,” she replied. “Even so, do not divulge more than seems needful.”

Jason turned back to the old guide. “Do you have a name?”

“Bactrus.”

“I’m Jason. Bactrus, will you keep everything I tell you private?”

“Every patron has the right to privacy. I will protect that right, if you desire.”

“I do. I was told to come here by an oracle.”

Bactrus smiled patiently. “My boy, many profess the gift of prescience.”

“This was the oracle of Mianamon. The head oracle. She died to get the prophecy she shared with us.”

“Mianamon you say? A young sect of truth tellers, last I heard, but reputedly legitimate. Perhaps they have fallen into error in the intervening years. This library has sat dormant for centuries, you know.”

“I know. I’m pretty sure the oracle was legit.”

“Time will tell. What do you know of Darian? Have you other reasons for suspecting he survives?”

“Just the word of the oracle.”

“Allow me to furnish some general background. Like most individuals possessing abnormal skill with Edomic, Darian lived an extended lifetime. More extended than most wizards, in fact, which implies significant power. Thousands of years ago, toward the end of his career, already growing frail with age, Darian left his comfortable home in the city of Darvis Kur.”

“The Drowned City,” Jason interjected.

“You know something of our history,” Bactrus approved. “This was long before the incident with Pothan the Slow, but yes, I refer to the same Darvis Kur that now lies in the Sunken Lands. Darian left his comfortable home for a secret abode in the wilderness, where he planned to end his days.”

“Secret abode?” Jason asked. “How secret?”

“Most secret,” Bactrus emphasized. “The disappearance produced quite an uproar. You see, Darian was undisputedly the greatest seer Lyrian had known. Past, present, and future were open to him as to no other before or since. Fire aided his visions, earning him the secondary title of pyromancer. He had helped and guided the people of Lyrian for generations. He was old, but there were still years in him. In spite of that, he vanished abruptly and with little explanation, which spawned rumors for centuries.”

“What rumors?” Jason asked.

“Darian had many servants and disciples. Some claimed he had seen a vision of the place where he was supposed to die and that he had become obsessed with spending the remaining years of his life there. Others asserted he had been hoarding treasure over the years and wanted to die entombed with his riches. Some rumors even purported that Darian had found the secret to everlasting life and meant to prophesy in hiding until the end of time. These were some of the earliest and best documented assertions. Over the years there has been no shortage of additional speculation.”

“So he might be alive?”

The spectral guide chuckled. "It would be an unprecedented feat. No matter his ability, no matter how diligently he conserved his vigor, Darian should have perished millennia ago. But who is an old library guide to label anything impossible?"

"Did anyone ever find his last home?"

"You must understand, treasure hunters tried to uncover this secret for a thousand years before giving up. The last abode of Darian the Seer is the stuff of legend, a mirage that has been pursued by countless doomed expeditions. Respected oracles and seers have sought the final dwelling place of Darian, including several truth sayers he had personally trained, but their efforts yielded nothing. As with other such legends, the only claims of success over the years came from unreliable sources with little or no proof."

"Now I get why you laughed earlier," Jason said.

"I am glad you can empathize," Bactrus said. "The hunt for the last abode of Darian the Pyromancer was abandoned as folly centuries before this library became dormant. I found it humorous that our first visitor in many long years came chasing such a far-fetched legend."

Jason sighed. "The idea of finding the last home of Darian the Seer has become a joke."

"It was a joke fifteen hundred years ago," Bactrus said. "Now it has been so long that most have forgotten the idea was ever amusing."

Jason glanced over at Farfalee. "The seed people I'm with knew of Darian, but they didn't seem to know how absurd the quest for his home is considered."

"Not surprising," Bactrus said. "Compared to Darian, even the Amar Kabal are young. The quest you describe is a fool's errand. The search for his final dwelling place has been long forgotten. Nevertheless, the name of Darian will endure forever. He truly was the greatest seer of all time."

"Great enough that if he knew he could live forever, he might have moved away from Darvis Kur before the city flooded?"

Bactrus smiled. "An interesting observation."

"Everyone may have forgotten this was ever a joke, but the oracle I spoke with was the real deal. Her predictions brought me here from the Beyond. She couldn't see his home, but she seemed certain we could discover the location here. We don't need the location to find treasure. We need it to learn a secret that can save Lyrian. Can you help me?"

"You have a flair for the dramatic," Bactrus said. "And I have a soft spot for the enthusiastic pursuit of hopeless causes. Besides, my job is to serve as your

guide. If this is the knowledge you seek, I shall do all in my power to aid you.”

“Where do we start?” Jason asked. “We don’t have much time.”

Bactrus furrowed his brow. “How long do you have?”

“We’re not sure,” Jason said. “Do you know what’s going on across Lyrian right now?”

“I know much of what is written here,” Bactrus said. “But I have learned nothing from outside since our last visitors arrived. The Maumet sealed us off from the rest of the world.”

“What happened to the people here?” Jason wondered.

“Most tried to flee the island. Far as we could tell, the Maumet took them all. Some tried to hide here. The Maumet has never entered the library. It has never tried. Eventually those hiding here either took their chances with the Maumet or starved.”

Jason frowned. “What happened to the bodies? You know, the ones who starved?”

“Apart from the Edomic spells preserving the walls, artifacts, and books here, there are a few simple constructs that assist with shelving and trash collection. These constructs deposited the corpses in a storage room.”

“Gross,” Jason said.

Bactrus shrugged. “Less unpleasant than some alternatives.”

“Well, a lot has happened since then. You know about Maldor?”

“The apprentice to Zokar.”

“Zokar is dead. Eldrin destroyed all the major libraries except for this one. All the wizards are gone now, except for Maldor, who is setting himself up as emperor. His forces will follow us here anytime. If they find us here, they’ll kill us.”

“An acceptable reason for haste,” the old guide allowed. “Let me briefly review what you can find here pertinent to your search. I have aided many with research on this topic, though as you might guess, I have had no serious inquiries in a great while. The texts you desire are ancient and almost uniformly amount to unconfirmed speculation. All I can offer are a thousand different unverified theories.”

Jason rubbed his forehead. “The information has to be here.”

“The correct answer may lie camouflaged among those many guesses. In your lifetime, without interference and with infinite funding, you could perhaps pursue forty or fifty of those leads. The search would take you all over the world.”

Jason thought of Galloran attacking Felrook. “We only have one shot. Even going straight to the right destination might take too long. Maldor is about to crush us. Are you aware of all the possible sources we could check? Is there another guide who might know something you missed?”

Bactus bristled at the question. “I am the chief guide for ancient history. And the last abode of Darian the Seer is an area of personal expertise. Any of the other guides who wished to be of service would refer you to me. I personally know the contents of every scroll, map, and volume relevant to your inquiry. You will find no other pertinent text in this library, unless you can read ancient Petruscan.”

Jason turned to Farfalee. She did not look like she was getting favorable news from her guide. “Hey, Farfalee. Do you know ancient Petruscan?”

She brightened. “Petruscan? Actually, yes. Petruscan is the most obscure language with which I am familiar.”

# THE PETRUSCAN SCROLL

Did you catch that?” Jason asked, turning to Bactrus.

“I heard her,” Bactrus said, bewildered. “That language is not just dead. The cemetery where it was buried has crumbled to dust. Many of our guides possess extensive linguistic expertise. None here knows Petruscan. There was no need. We had no Petruscan texts. Very few survived elsewhere. How does she know Petruscan?”

Jason looked to Farfalee. “He wants to know where you learned Petruscan. Why won’t he just ask you?”

“The guide will only directly address the patron holding the stone,” Farfalee said. “But he’ll hear my response just fine. In my youth I worked as a researcher for Eldrin in the Great Document Hall at Elboreth. He had assembled a sizable team to comb through ancient writings in pursuit of Edomic references. The task required several of us to master dead languages. To my knowledge, the only Petruscan texts in existence resided in the Great Document Hall, and a small team of experts on-site were the only people keeping the language alive. I was one of two among the Amar Kabal who learned to read it.”

“Who was the other?” Jasher asked.

“Kale, son of Hannock,” Farfalee replied. “His seed perished in the war with Zokar. After the war, when Eldrin razed the city he had founded and obliterated the Great Document Hall, I never expected to encounter Petruscan again.”

Bactrus gave Jason a significant stare. “How is it that this remarkable woman came to be in your company?”

“The oracle sent seven of us to find Darian the Seer.”

Bactrus giggled excitedly. “This oracle told you the information was here and sent the seedwoman with you—probably the sole person in all of Lyrian who can read Petruscan.”

“Right.” Jason struggled to restrain his excitement. It certainly appeared to be more than coincidence. Maybe the oracle had a more detailed plan than any of them had realized!



“Allow me to relate a brief account,” Bactrus said. “High in the Sturloch Mountains northwest of here, there once stood a minor storehouse of ancient texts, most in unreadable languages. The modest collection was cared for by a small but long-standing order of loremasters. As the forces of Zokar began to plunder villages in the region, the loremasters sent many of the texts here to the Celestine Library for safekeeping. Those writings continue to reside here on loan, since the loremasters have never come to collect them. Presumably both the order and the storehouse perished. Among the loaned texts are the only Petruscan works currently within these walls—relatively recent acquisitions.”

“Ask him why he suspects that any of those texts might be relevant to our search,” Farfalee said.

Jason asked the question.

“The name Darian is mentioned several times on one of the scrolls,” Bactrus said. “Petruscan characters were not used for his name, so it is the only discernible word on the document.”

“Why would Darian be mentioned in a Petruscan scroll?” Farfalee wondered. “The Petrusian society was extinct long before he was born. By the time Darian lived, Petruscan was already a dead language.”

“You heard her?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“What can you tell us?” Jason prompted.

“I found the anomaly intriguing,” Bactrus said, “but without a Petruscan translator I had no means to investigate. Petrusians wrote on metal plates. At least those were the only writings that survived. The text in question is written on a scroll. These writings could have been transcribed from metal plates, perhaps by a relatively modern scribe who translated the name Darian into more familiar characters. The scroll might preserve an arcane Petruscan prophecy regarding Darian. Seers have been known to prophesy about one another.”

“Or it could be a hoax,” Drake pointed out.

“The scroll could certainly be fraudulent,” Bactrus told Jason. “Swindlers have created many false trails to the last abode of Darian the Seer. In bygone days, certain adventurers would pay handsomely for clues to unearthing the fabled treasure.”

Farfalee raised a finger. “The scroll could be neither prophecy nor fraudulence. Some clever soul might have translated a sensitive message into Petruscan in order to conceal it.”

“Is that possible?” Jason asked Bactrus.

The old guide scrunched his face in thought. "Perhaps even probable."

"Can you guide us to the scroll?" Jason asked.

"It would be my privilege," Bactrus replied.

Jason looked around. Drake, Jasher, and Farfalee had already returned their stones to the counter. Nia had exchanged hers to reanimate Tibrus.

"Nia," Jason scolded lightly, "what's with the soldier? Didn't Tibrus already tell us he isn't big on history?"

"I know," Nia replied. "But he isn't too proud to use common speech. My other guide insulted me. It looks like you four have this search for Darian well in hand, so I thought I might do some other research."

Jason glanced from Nia to the strapping warrior. "I'm not sure it could ever work out between you two."

"You deserve someone more substantial," Drake added with a smirk.

"At least tangible," Jason said.

Nia gave an exasperated sigh. "I really need his expertise. It's only a coincidence that he's attractive."

"Are you serious?" Jasher asked.

"Absolutely," Nia responded.

"Very well," Farfalee said. "The rest of us will accompany Jason and Bactrus."

Jason wagged a playful finger at Nia. "We had better not catch you in the poetry section."

Drake turned away, a hand over his mouth. Jasher developed a sudden cough.

Nia put a hand on her hip and cocked her head. "Very mature, Jason. It's important research. You'll see."

"What research?" Jason pressed. "You could be more specific."

"You're right. I could. But maybe I don't think you deserve to know."

"No hint?" Jason asked. "Not even a category?"

"You'll find out later," Nia replied.

"Tragic romances," Drake deadpanned.

Everyone laughed besides Nia and the guides.

\* \* \*

Even with a guide escorting them along the quickest route, it was a long hike to the scroll. The Celestine Library went on and on, room after room, level upon level. They passed numerous stairways and branching corridors. In some of the larger chambers, bookshelves towered like cliffs, accessible only by systems of ladders and platforms. Aside from endless texts, the group passed masterful

paintings and murals, meticulous mosaics, exquisitely detailed sculptures, mounted weapons of the finest craftsmanship, and tempting displays of priceless jeweled artifacts. Since the library was abandoned, Jason supposed he would be justified in salvaging some of the costly relics. Without the warning from Farfalee about Edomic traps, he would have paused to fill his pockets on more than one occasion.

Bactrus walked beside Jason the entire way. Despite his holographic appearance and the fact that his footsteps made no sound, the guide moved around as if he were subject to the laws of gravity.

“We’re in the middle of a desperate war,” Jason mentioned to Bactrus as they mounted a broad stairway. “Are there any weapons here at the library that we could borrow for the cause?” He tried to act casual, even though he had spent some time deciding how best to phrase the question.

“Most of the weapons and armor you see on display are priceless pieces of our permanent collection,” Bactrus replied. “We did not even lend our books out to the wisest of wizards, let alone any of the artifacts housed here. I am afraid the armaments must remain.”

“That’s what I expected,” Jason said.

“You could always try the cloakroom,” Bactrus mused. “Visitors left their weapons and armor there. The policy was mandatory. Anything remaining will never be claimed and does not belong to the library.”

“Worth a look,” Drake said. “Nearly anyone with the funding or initiative to come here would have been well equipped.”

“Although they probably would have retrieved their gear when they tried to flee,” Farfalee speculated. “Also, some who fled might have claimed the equipment of others. But still, I agree, worth a look.”

“You might also inspect the antiquities shop,” Bactrus said. “The inventory is not technically part of the collection, since it was for sale. The exorbitant prices were meant to raise funds. But with no shopkeeper present to manage the inventory, any remaining items could reasonably be considered abandoned and available.”

“Thanks for the tips,” Jason said.

“I like how this guide thinks,” Drake confided to Jasher.

In a distant wing of the library, at the end of a hall several stories above ground level, Bactrus stopped before a hefty door. “This section is restricted access,” the guide explained. “Loaned texts in extinct languages. Much of the material here came from the same repository as the scroll you seek. More than

half the content cannot be deciphered by any of our guides.” He indicated a round depression in the center of the door. “Place your stone into the recess.”

Jason pressed his stone into the depression. It fit perfectly. The stone glowed momentarily, tumblers rattled, and the door swung smoothly open. Jason kept the stone in his hand.

The room beyond was not large, but contained many shelves and cubbies. The few books on display were primitively bound. Metal plates, clay tablets, and tightly wound scrolls were much more prevalent.

Bactrus led them to a bulky cabinet full of small, square drawers. He indicated a particular one. Pulling it open, Jason found that the long drawer contained a scroll.

Farfalee removed the scroll, unrolling it carefully. Nearly a yard long, the yellowed document contained row after row of tidy, unrecognizable characters. Farfalee started at the top, squinting at the words. Her lips bent into a smile.

“It purports to describe a route to the last abode of Darian the Seer,” she announced. “According to this document, our road will take us . . . through the Fuming Waste and into the mountains beyond.”

“Dangerous country,” Jasher said.

“But not particularly distant,” Drake noted.

“Could this be real?” Jason asked Bactrus.

The old guide bent over the scroll, scanning it intently. “The scroll was certainly not written by Petrusians. As we established previously, although Darian lived long ago, by his time the Petrusian society had vanished and the language was out of use. And according to what your comrade has shared, the scroll does not purport to be a prophecy.”

“Could it be part of a scam?” Jason asked.

Bactrus lowered his eyebrows. “If the scroll is fraudulent, Petrusian is an odd choice of language, since it was comprehensible to only a handful of scholars. It would have required a discouraging amount of work for a buyer to translate the content.”

Drake folded his arms. “A swindler might have decided that the odd choice of language would lend the scroll an air of authenticity. Furthermore, the period required to decipher the message could allow the crook additional time to disappear before the buyer found the information disappointing.”

“Did you catch that?” Jason asked Bactrus.

“Plausible reasoning. Does anyone claim authorship?”

Farfalee skipped to the bottom of the manuscript. “The author is described at the beginning and the end as ‘the Steering Hand.’ Would you like to hear a rough translation of the introduction?”

“Please,” Jasher said.

Farfalee cleared her throat. She read haltingly, as if intent on choosing the most accurate words. “ ‘Courtesy of the Steering Hand, herein the worthy seeker of enlightenment will find instructions to reach the final dwelling place of Darian, son of Thebrun, the renowned seer of Darvis Kur and author of more than two thousand verified prophecies great and small.’ The account goes on to reveal the general location of the last abode of Darian, and then gets very specific naming landmarks to use as guideposts along the way.”

“What do you think?” Jason asked, studying Bactrus.

The guide lifted his empty hands in a noncommittal gesture. “Genuine or false, the message would probably read the same. Only by following the directions to the end could you know for certain.”

“Do we have a better option?” Jason asked.

“Over the years, all of the other leads have been explored with no evident results. The most promising leads have been pursued countless times. Since arriving here, this particular scroll has never been read, and thus it has never been tested. And thanks to the foresight of your oracle, you arrived with the one person in Lyrian capable of reading it. If you want me to guess which source you should rely on, this would be my pick.”

“Good enough for me,” Jason said.

“Me too,” Jasher agreed. “We need a path, we need it quick, and circumstances certainly point to this scroll.”

Drake frowned. “If the scroll is false, our quest will fail.”

“True,” Jasher said. “Do you expect to find a better option?”

Drake slowly shook his head. “I agree that this seems to be what we’re looking for.”

“There is a warning toward the end,” Farfalee said.

“Tell us,” Drake said.

“ ‘Seek not this sanctum in the name of vanity or avarice. Enter with no instruments of war or tainted intentions. Calamity awaits the undeserving. Only the . . . chosen . . . can survive.’ ” She looked up. “ ‘Chosen’ may not be the precise word. But it is close.”

Jason realized that all of his companions were looking at him. The oracle had specifically stated that he needed to find the last abode of Darian the Seer.

Apparently, that made him the chosen one, at least in their minds. The attention made him a little uncomfortable.

“Do any of the other texts lead to the Fuming Waste?” Jason asked.

“Several,” Bactrus answered, “although the same could be said for nearly any location in Lyrian that you would care to name.”

“We’ll need detailed maps of the Fuming Waste,” Jasher said.

“Can you help us?” Jason asked the guide.

“We should adjourn to the geography center,” he replied. “You will find not only the most thorough assortment of maps ever assembled, but materials with which to copy the contents of the scroll.”

“We can bring the scroll to the other area?” Jason checked.

Bactrus gave a nod. “The texts are not to leave the library, but within these walls they are meant to be studied and used.”

“Lead the way,” Jason said.

Once again Bactrus ushered them along a lengthy route. At first they backtracked past familiar sights, but soon they forked off through new rooms, stairways, and passages.

“Being a loremaster here would be good exercise,” Jason remarked as they passed a glittering stained-glass window. “Are we getting close?”

“Just up ahead,” Bactrus promised.

Jasher held up a hand, bringing them to a halt, a finger to his lips. Jason listened. A male voice was calling their names from a distance. There was an edge of panic to the tone.

Jasher cupped both hands around his mouth. “We’re here!” he belted. “Western wall, four floors up, near the third largest dome.”

Jason was impressed by Jasher’s clear sense of their location.

“On my way!” the distant voice answered.

“Won’t be good news,” Drake murmured.

“Jasher,” Farfalee said, “perhaps you should wait here for the messenger. We can run ahead and start copying the needful information.”

“Yes,” Jasher said. He looked to Jason.

Jason turned to Bactrus. “Can you tell Jasher how to find us?”

The old guide issued terse instructions; then Farfalee started running. Jason and Drake followed, and the old guide as well. Jason noticed that Bactrus sprinted as swiftly as any of them and showed no signs of tiring. After a few more twists and turns, followed by a flight of stairs, they entered a large space dedicated to maps and atlases. A huge relief map of Lyrian dominated the floor,

with the rest of the room built around it. A skylight above added natural brightness, and a balcony around the top half of the room allowed patrons to access high shelves or to gaze down at the floor map from above.

Bactrus directed them to an oversized book of maps dedicated to the Fuming Waste. While Farfalee perused the maps, he led Jason and Drake to collect paper, ink, and pens.

“Will the ink work after all these years?” Jason asked.

“Yes, if the bottle has been sealed,” the guide replied. “Edomic was used to protect and preserve nearly all of our resources.”

Jasher and one of the drinlings who had accompanied Aram burst into the room. “We have a situation,” Jasher said.

“What?” Drake asked.

“Six ships on the northeastern horizon, coming this way, including an interceptor.”

“The wind is still from the east?” Drake asked.

“Yes,” Jasher said. “Aram found an observation room atop the highest dome. The ships just came into view using telescopes. They are still hours away. Aram thinks if we hurry, we might have a chance to escape undetected.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Drake asked. “Farfalee?”

“Depends how long it takes to copy the scroll and a map.”

“Captain Aram has already run ahead to prepare the *Valiant*,” the drinling said. “He knows you will follow as soon as you see fit.”

“Anything you can do to help us hurry?” Jason asked Bactrus.

The old guide pursed his lips. “Possibly. Ask your friend if she ever held an office when she worked at the Great Document Hall.”

“Farfalee?” Jason asked.

“I attained the office of lesser loremaster,” she replied.

“Ask if she recalls her words,” Bactrus instructed.

“Farfalee?”

She spoke several Edomic phrases. They referenced fidelity in preserving the rich history of Lyrian, honesty in dealing with those seeking knowledge, and courage in protecting the documents in her care.

“Those are the words,” Bactrus told Jason. “The scroll is not a permanent part of our collection. I could release it into her custody as if she were the loremaster who came to return it to Cirum Elsador, the repository from whence it came.”

“Really?” Jason exclaimed.

“I have that authority,” Bactrus said. “And she is, after all, the only remaining person who can read it. Ask your friend to pledge to see the scroll either safely delivered to Cirum Elsador or else returned here.”

“I promise,” Farfalee said.

“Have her touch the scroll to the stone,” Bactrus instructed.

They did so, and the stone briefly pulsed with light.

Bactrus regarded Jason somberly. “The scroll is now under her stewardship. You also need a map.”

“Yes,” Jason said.

“We have diverse maps for purchase,” Bactrus said. “All part of a service once offered by the cartographers here. They are not so finely detailed as some available in the collection, and the selection is limited, but I am aware of five commercial maps that together should serve your needs. As with the antiquities shop, since there is no proprietor present, I can simply let you take them.”

“This could make all the difference,” Jasher said. “It will save hours.”

“You could attempt to copy our maps by hand,” Bactrus told Jason, “but it would require considerable skill to match the detail. The commercial maps will most likely serve better than any copies you might render.”

Bactrus led them to a side of the room crowded with counters, cabinets, and drawers. With his help, they collected five rolled maps. Farfalee scanned them to be sure. “These will serve,” she decided.

“Take care in the Fuming Waste,” Bactrus warned Jason. “The landscape is constantly changing. The main features should be relatively constant, but nothing on the maps can be guaranteed.”

“Right,” Jasher said. “To the entrance.”

“Can you lead us there double time?” Jason asked Bactrus.

“I do not tire,” the guide responded.

As they ran, Drake spoke up. “I’d like to peek at that antiquities shop before we go.”

“I wouldn’t mind a look at the cloakroom,” Jasher added.

“Every minute counts,” Farfalee reminded them.

“We’ll hurry,” Drake promised.

“I can lend you the stone,” Jason said.

“Much appreciated,” Drake replied.

“I wish we had time to hide the stones,” Farfalee said. “I don’t want to make it easy for our enemies to use these resources.”

“Maldor could probably learn a lot here,” Jason realized.



“If we lose the war,” Farfalee said, “this library will provide the means to significantly enhance his power.”

“Is there any way to lock the library?” Jason asked.

“It would require an acting loremaster who knew the words,” Bactrus said. “We guides have no such authority. The outer doors will open to any Edomic greeting.”

“Hiding the stones isn’t worth the effort,” Jasher panted. “If we bring the scroll, I can think of no immediate benefit the library can offer our foes. Unless perhaps there are useful items in the antiques shop.”

“Very well,” Farfalee said. “You two check the cloakroom and the shop. But don’t lag! The time will be best spent escaping.”

They ran the rest of the way to the entrance without conversation. By the time they reached the lobby, Jason was damp with sweat and breathing hard. Only the drinling and Bactrus showed no sign of fatigue.

Jason handed the stone to Jasher.

“Does Nia know we’re leaving?” Farfalee suddenly asked.

“We already found her,” the drinling said. “She and the others have gone ahead. We’re the last people in the library.”

“Come on,” Farfalee urged, leading the way out the front door.

Glancing back, Jason saw Bactrus giving instructions to Jasher. “Thanks, Bactrus!” Jason called, but the guide remained focused on the seedman.

Outside, Jason saw that afternoon was progressing toward evening. He raced alongside Farfalee and the drinling through the greenery down to the beach, where they found Corinne and Nia waiting, along with Zoo and a single launch.

“How are you feeling?” Jason asked Corinne.

“Much better,” she said. She was on her feet and had some of her color back. “And I might stay that way. Nia did me a favor. She brought me a remedy for seasickness.”

Jason turned to Nia. “Really?”

“Tibrus is a medical expert,” Nia explained smugly. “He showed me a picture of an herb called langerhop that was once cultivated here on the island to help visitors who found the crossing unpleasant. He said it’s a potent remedy, working well even in chronic instances. I found a huge patch of it growing wild on the south side of the library. Corinne already sampled some, and we loaded a lot into the launch.”

Corinne gave Nia a big hug. “If this works, I’ll owe you forever!”

Jason felt more than a little jealous. If he had been a bit more considerate, he could have been Corinne's hero!

"We should get that launch ready," Farfalee said. "We need to leave the moment Jasher and Drake return."

The two drinlings turned the launch around. Jason, Nia, and Corinne wandered over to it. Jason watched the sea lapping against the shore with wimpier waves than ever.

Within a few minutes Jasher and Drake came bounding out of the vegetation and sprinted across the sand. They held three black shields shaped like extremely rounded triangles. Drake wore a round steel cap and a breastplate that matched the shield. A dark, velvety cloak billowed behind Jasher.

The two seedmen leaped into the launch. The drinlings shoved off and then manned the oars. Grinning, Drake held out one of the shields to Farfalee.

"Titan crab," she said, hefting it.

"I almost got killed by a titan crab," Jason mentioned.

"Lighter than steel," Jasher said. "And a good deal stronger."

"I'll admit," Farfalee said, "titan-crab shields were probably worth the wait."

"The cloakroom was empty except for junk," Drake said. "But the shop looked untouched. You would weep to know the valuables we left behind. The art alone!"

"We concentrated on useful items," Jasher said.

"How novel," Farfalee commented.

Jasher gave her a lopsided grin. "But that didn't stop me from thinking of you." He held out a jeweled necklace and a fancy silver bracelet.

Farfalee could not disguise her pleasure. "Oh, Jash! You scoundrel! You pillaged for me! That necklace is divine! It's useful—it must be worth a fortune!"

"And since I have no spouse," Drake said, "I thought of you girls." He handed Corinne and Nia matching rings set with huge blue gems.

"It's lovely," Corinne gushed, her eyes dancing.

Jason could not help but notice that everyone was scoring major points with her today except him.

Nia said nothing. She held up the ring, transfixed by the glinting facets. At last she let out a low whistle. "I never imagined owning something so fancy."

"Facing grim peril should have some rewards," Drake said, rapping his titan-crab breastplate with his knuckles. "The extra shield is for Lord Jason."

"Really?" Jason said, suddenly feeling much better.

“We don’t want to make it too easy for them to kill you,” Drake insisted cheerfully. “Windbreak Island has been good to us. We have our scroll, and our maps, and several rare and valuable items besides. Now all we have to do is get away.”

They reached the ship and climbed to the deck. As a group of drinlings took care of the launch, the *Valiant* set sail. Aram approached, and Farfalee filled him in about the scroll and the maps. Jasher showed off the shields and gave Aram a curved knife with a jeweled hilt.

“How do we get away?” Jasher asked.

“We took the time to study their heading from the observation room,” Aram said. “They’re coming from the northeast, on a direct course for Windbreak Island. So we’ll slip away to the southwest, using the same easterly wind, and keep the island between us until nightfall. They’ll want to search the island thoroughly, so they’ll surely stop there for the night. If the wind holds, by daybreak we should be out of sight even from the observation room.”

“A cogent plan,” Drake said with mock astonishment. “You really must have been a smuggler! I was convinced you had made it all up.”

Aram smiled. “I think we set sail just in time. Whatever our enemies may have known about our intentions before, they’ll have a difficult time finding us now.”

As the group dispersed, Drake pulled Jason aside. The seedman produced an elegant necklace set with extravagant gemstones.

“Drake,” Jason said, “you shouldn’t have.”

Ignoring the comment, the seedman looked pleased with himself. “I also swiped a beautiful necklace for Rachel, lest she feel forgotten.”

Jason smiled, wondering if Drake realized what he had just implied. “You think we’re going to make it.”

“What?”

“You think we’ll have a chance to give it to her.”

Drake tried to muster a tough stare. “Now, don’t start putting words in my mouth. We’re probably as doomed as ever.”

Jason tried not to grin. “I don’t blame you. I’m feeling pretty good too. Things could have gone a lot worse on the island.”

“Things went plenty bad. But yes, we bested the Maumet, we found the scroll, and we might even get away before our enemies catch our scent. Things could have gone worse. There’s still plenty of hardship and uncertainty ahead. Only a fool would predict we’d survive this . . . but who knows?”

“You brought the necklace just in case.”

“Exactly. One never knows.” He jangled the necklace. “Just in case.”

# MARCHING

A warm spring sun glared overhead as Rachel rode along a wide dirt road through pastoral country. The sounds and smells of men and horses surrounded her and stretched out behind. She was glad that her status as the Dark Lady allowed her to ride toward the front of the column. It turned out that thousands of soldiers on the move churned up a great deal of dust just about wherever they went. Her position near the front helped her avoid the worst of it, and the black veils that screened her face provided additional protection.

Of course, she was not truly at the front. Not in a vulnerable way. Scouts ranged far ahead in all directions, and a vanguard of mounted troops rode well beyond the main body of the army.

Galloran had anticipated trouble crossing the Telkron River. Any of the viable crossings would create a bottleneck where a relatively small amount of fighting men and manglers could stall the entire host. But there had not been any resistance. Not at the Telkron, not before, not after. The scouts continued to report no threatening enemy movements. So far the experience of marching to war had been rather dull.

Snowflake was as good a horse as Rachel had hoped—strong, tireless, and quick to obey. The mare moved more smoothly than any horse Rachel had ridden. Tark and Ferrin rode near her, but conversation was scarce. Io had been assigned as Galloran's assistant and bodyguard, the same role Dorsio had once filled.

Galloran spent a surprising amount of time among the troops. He rode up and down the column during the day and visited their campsites at night, never lingering anywhere long, just allowing the men to see him and receive a few encouraging words. Sometimes Rachel wondered when he slept. It could not have been more than a few hours each night.

Galloran never wore his blindfold anymore except in private meetings. He had explained that a host of their size could go nowhere in secret. Some of the men had taken to brandishing their weapons at Galloran and shaking their fists

when he rode past. At first Rachel had found the display disrespectful, until she realized they were sending a message to Felrook through his eyes. Galloran would sometimes scowl at the rowdy taunts to encourage them. He trusted the officers to maintain discipline and keep the joke from getting out of hand.

Every night Rachel slept in a tent on a comfortable cot. Tark and Ferrin shared the space behind a divider. Sometimes in the night Rachel would worry about lurkers intruding. She never took off the charms that shielded her mind. At times, in the dark, she clung to her necklace like a lifeline.

Galloran had a large tent that was used for meetings. Whenever a discussion was in progress, twelve burly guards surrounded the tent, three on each side. Rachel was not usually included in the discussions, but one evening after supper Rachel, Ferrin, and Tark were summoned to the pavilion. Galloran, blindfolded, awaited them with Io at his side. Bread and cheese covered a table topped by a large map.

“Good evening,” Galloran said. “I apologize that my time has been spread thin lately. Much of my day is occupied with eagle messages and scouting reports. I wanted to bring you up-to-date on our progress and get your reactions to the current state of our campaign. I want you all to understand our situation, and would be interested to hear your evaluations.”

“Happy to serve,” Ferrin said.

“We are currently experiencing far less resistance than I had expected,” Galloran said. “The country before us is not being burned or plundered to starve us. Our host is not being harassed. Our enemies have not bothered to destroy bridges or take any action to slow us. What does this tell you?”

“That we’re walking into a trap,” Ferrin said. “We’re going exactly where the emperor desires.”

“If that is the case,” Galloran said, “I would still expect some token effort to impede us, if for no other reason than to make his approval of our movements less obvious.”

“Such token resistance would suggest he views us as a threat,” Ferrin replied. “Maldor is in no hurry to show us any such respect. He does not want to burn crops that his subjects are otherwise sure to harvest after we are corpses. He does not want the trouble of rebuilding bridges. He has elected to belittle us with a seeming lack of attention. He is telling your soldiers that he views them as harmless. He is inviting them to march to their deaths, offering no small victories along the way.”

From behind her veil, Rachel watched Ferrin, impressed. He certainly had a sharp mind for strategy.

"I'm afraid that I agree with your assessment," Galloran said. "Maldor knows the prophecy. He knows where we are going. He knows we mean to besiege Felrook. And he is inviting us to try."

Ferrin nodded. "Why seek to slow us when he knows we are marching to the battlefield where he holds the greatest advantage? Felrook is ringed with mountains. There are only three good ways to reach it. The western pass, which lies east of Harthenham. The northwestern pass, which is the narrowest. And the eastern plain, where the mountains fail. No doubt the drinlings will enter by the eastern route."

"Correct," Galloran said. "The Amar Kabal will join us at the western pass. The northwestern way is closer to the Seven Vales, but there is no use in losing troops trying to take two passes."

"We must keep vigilant," Ferrin said. "Maldor might be trying to lull us into complacency. Just when we think he is giving us easy access to Felrook, he might hit us hard."

"We're braced for a big ambush," Galloran said. "Our scouts and spies are working hard. Yet we have found nothing."

"Then we will probably face our first major challenge at the western pass," Ferrin said. "The walls have been built high and strong. Without the gatecrashers I doubt whether our forces could get through. Even with large orantium spheres the cost will be dear. We will pay in blood."

Rachel squirmed at the thought. Sometimes she was grateful for the veil to help hide her reactions.

"Or if Maldor holds to his current strategy," Galloran said, "he might opt to offer small resistance at the pass."

"Trap us in the valley with him," Ferrin said. "If he had a host ready to come from the east, we would be in trouble. The war would be over. Is Kadara still besieged?"

"His armies in the east remain in place at present," Galloran said. "I'm still in contact by eagle with Kadara, Inkala, Highport, and the drinlings. If he summons his armies home, we'll have advance warning."

Ferrin nodded. "The emperor might be quietly mustering a sufficient host to deal with us. He could draw from his occupying forces all over Lyrian. The troops we are not facing now might have been withdrawn to hammer us all together."

Galloran nodded. "After winning our way through the western pass, we need to leave sufficient men to hold it. That pass will be our only retreat if an army floods in from the east."

"He may not even need to retake the pass," Ferrin speculated. "What if he places a large enough army on the far side? Without the walls and the towers in his possession, he could still close the way."

"He could very realistically do just that," Galloran said. "We'd be caught between two armies."

Rachel was impressed by how casually they could discuss scenarios that could lead to their destruction. Hopefully, anticipating the possibilities would help them prevent the disaster from striking.

"If he can spare the soldiers," Ferrin said, "the emperor might summon forces from Meridon. How goes the revolt there?"

"The uprising amounted to less than we had expected," Galloran said. "A few interceptors were stolen. A few others burned. Most of the rebels fell. Vernon and Trivett perished. We will see no troops from the endeavor. In the larger scheme of things, the insurrection was a mere irritation."

Ferrin folded his arms. "Maldor's strategy is sound. We cannot take Felrook. No fortress in Lyrian enjoys more advantageous geography. As you know, it sits atop a mount in the center of Lake Fellion. If we try to construct a fleet of ferries, Maldor has ample armaments to sink them before they get close. And there is only one way up the cliffs to the castle gate. The path can be destroyed if needed. If left intact, the path allows very limited access. We cannot crash gates that we cannot reach. And Felrook is extremely well provisioned. Maldor could last for years against a siege." Ferrin paused, thinking.

"Go on," Galloran encouraged.

"The protective lake prevents soldiers from sallying forth out of Felrook and taking the offensive. To compensate, Maldor erected three keeps on high ground around the lake. The three strongholds fortify one another and allow counterattacks in the case of a siege. Taking any of them would be an enormous challenge."

"And the ferry is protected by a wall," Galloran said. "It could function as a fortress as well."

Ferrin nodded grimly. "Maldor could very well trap us between a castle we cannot take and an overwhelming host we cannot fight. The valley is large. He could hide massive reserve forces. He could design any number of ambushes. In short, if I were commander, I would not lead us into that valley."



“Nor would I,” Galloran agreed. “Not using my own reason. We do not have nearly the manpower to attack the emperor directly. We are apparently marching into a trap that should kill us all. My faith is in the oracle, and in the quest Lord Jason seeks to accomplish. There is a piece missing to this puzzle. When Jason finds it, we must be in position to take advantage.”

Ferrin exhaled slowly. “Such faith.”

Rachel worried that it might be too much faith. Should she speak up? It wasn't like she had any real experience with battle strategy.

“Do not forget that faith in what the oracle saw is all we have left,” Galloran said. “On our own, no matter how well we fight or how cleverly we strategize, we simply lack the resources to win. Maldor is too strong. Our options are either to walk the path Esmira prescribed or to withdraw and mount a defensive stand that buys us perhaps ten years.”

“Maldor knows we're coming,” Ferrin said quietly. “He knows what allies will join us. We know our battle strategy is unsound. We suspect he rejoices that we are marching into a trap. We are giving him the chance to eliminate his remaining opponents with a single stroke. What would have taken him years will be over in weeks. Yet it is the only chance to defeat him, so we are going forward.”

“What say you, Rachel?” Galloran muttered. “Are we fools?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “Our chances look really bad. The oracle warned us that we would probably lose. So we probably will. But if the prophecy is our only hope, I guess we have to try.” She looked at Ferrin. “The only way to know will be to see it through to the end.”

“I agree with Rachel,” Ferrin said. “We will probably perish. But I can think of worse ways to go.”

“A small chance beats no chance every time,” Tark said. “No matter how small.”

“We have some advantages,” Io said. “Maldor may understand what it means to fight the Amar Kabal, but his soldiers do not. Not really. Not even the eldest of the displacers. It has been too long since the seedfolk last marched to war. There are no finer warriors in Lyrian. No army can confront them casually. And we drinlings do not fall easily. We have built up our numbers larger than our foes could anticipate.”

“Even if we fail,” Galloran acknowledged, “we will make a respectable showing. Knowing there is any hope for success, I would not meet my end another way. Many of those I lead may not properly comprehend how dire the

upcoming battle will be. Some of those particulars cannot be confided to the common soldier. Leading these men to probable disaster is my burden, but I am willing to bear it.”

“They know it will be grim,” Ferrin said. “Some of their expectations may be unrealistic, but you lead brave men. Cowards would not have come. The simplest among them know that we will be at a great disadvantage.”

“I am glad to know the four of you stand with me,” Galloran said. “We know by prophecy that only if we stand united can we triumph. Ferrin, the nearer we draw to Felrook, the more I will have to rely on your expertise.”

“I am here to serve as needed,” Ferrin pledged.

“We have confronted some grave realities tonight,” Galloran said. “We must not close our eyes to the hardships ahead, nor should we defeat ourselves by deciding the cause will be lost. We will defy the odds. The path to victory exists. We will find it. That is all.”

Ferrin and Tark returned with Rachel to her tent. Once inside, they sat down together. Rachel felt mildly stunned by the meeting. She had never had such a thorough explanation of why they would probably lose. What information could Jason possibly find to reverse such a doomed situation?

“I appreciated the conversation with Galloran,” Ferrin said.

“It’s good of him to keep us informed,” Tark said. “We have no real claim on that information.”

“Not just for including us in his plans,” Ferrin clarified. “I had already worked out most of what we discussed through my own observations. I was relieved for the confirmation that we are not following a deluded man. Galloran is attacking Felrook with his eyes open, so to speak. He understands the peril. He realizes that our offensive defies common sense. He leads us there for the only acceptable reason—to fulfill the prophecy.”

Rachel frowned. Their strategy made no sense to Galloran or Ferrin. Jason’s quest didn’t make much sense either. They were all ignoring their common sense because of the prophecy. Was that right?

“What if the oracle fooled us?” Rachel asked numbly. “I used to worry about the oracle being mistaken, but what if it was deliberate? What if she was working for Maldor? What if he corrupted her somehow? What if we’re chasing a false hope? What if this is all just a big scheme to trick us into making the dumbest military choices imaginable?”

The tent became silent.

“You heard how vulnerable we’ll be when we attack Felrook,” Rachel said. “Safe in his castle, Maldor just has to sit back and watch his armies destroy us. What could Jason possibly learn that would change any of that? What secret can erase fortresses and armies? What secret could possibly give us an advantage?”

“If we knew,” Tark said, “Lord Jason’s quest would be unnecessary.”

“Is it necessary?” Rachel asked. “Or is it like the hunt for the Word? The magic word that could kill Maldor, protected by trusted guardians for years. The magic word that didn’t work and was just part of a plot to mess up his enemies! What if this is no different?”

Head down, Tark shifted uncomfortably. He would not make eye contact with her.

“The oracle of Mianamon held that office for a long time,” Ferrin said. “She had no reason to love Maldor. Quite the opposite. I have heard no rumors of Maldor holding any sway at Mianamon. Why would the oracle give her life to mislead us?”

“What if Maldor made a deal?” Rachel worried. “He likes bargains. He likes manipulation. What if he promised never to invade the jungle if she helped him crush us? What if the oracle lied to us in order to protect her people? She could have looked into the future to verify whether Maldor would keep his promise! She could have made a deal and been certain that Maldor would deliver! What if she sent Jason off on a quest for a nonexistent secret from a dead seer and sent Galloran to lead the last defenders of Lyrian to destruction?”

Ferrin gazed steadily at Rachel. His expression hinted at the thoughts whirling behind his eyes. “You could be right.”

“Or what if Maldor found a way to deliver a false prophecy to the oracle?” Rachel went on. “The torivors can get into our minds. I know that firsthand. What if they blurred her visions? She could have been sincere and still have misled us.”

“Again you could be right,” Ferrin conceded.

“Is it too late to turn back?” Rachel whispered.

“Not for us,” Ferrin said. “Not for Galloran, either, if he believed this theory. But if this theory is true, we would lose all hope. Unless we can *prove* the oracle misled us, I’m not sure we could ever convince Galloran to turn back.”

“Do you think I’m right?” Rachel asked.

Tark kept his eyes on the ground.

Ferrin shrugged. “There is no way to be certain. Your theory would explain our reckless offensive. It would explain seeking impossible information from a

dead prophet. It certainly is the sort of deception Maldor would invent, using our hope against us, giving us reasons to keep trying that only make us fail faster. It fits. But I'm not sure we could ever prove it. And you very well might be wrong. It is all speculation."

"Let's face the facts," Rachel said. "Which seems more likely? That the oracle of Mianamon somehow misled us? Or that our suicidal battle plan will be saved by some inspiring words from a prophet who died thousands of years ago?"

Ferrin chuckled. "Remember when I advised you to embrace the truth when facing hard choices?"

"Yes," Rachel said.

"I'm afraid I created a monster."

"Because I'm wrong?"

"Because you've discovered a possibility that I missed. And I'm having trouble explaining it away."

"We should bring this to Galloran," Tark said nervously.

Ferrin rubbed his eyes. "Should we? This doubt has the potential to destroy his faith. I know mine is already faltering. Without proof, I don't believe our theory is certain enough to sway Galloran from his course. We might only undermine his confidence."

"How could we get proof?" Rachel asked.

"The oracle is dead," Ferrin said. "If she betrayed us, she would have taken that secret to her grave. If Maldor got to her, none of that communication would have been in writing. The emperor would have used torivors for something so sensitive. If the oracle was fooled, even she had no idea. In either scenario we would find no proof at Mianamon. Maldor keeps his deepest secrets to himself. Only he or the torivors could provide the evidence we would need."

"What if I went to him?" Rachel asked dully. "What if I accepted his offer to study with him? I could try to find out if this is all another trick."

"There will be no evidence to uncover," Ferrin said. "It's all in his mind."

"Maybe I could get him to slip up," Rachel said. "He can be very candid in private. Maybe he would think I had no way to warn anyone. Maybe he would gloat. Maybe I could somehow get inside his mind and find the truth. Maybe I could ask him questions and study his reactions. Or open myself to the torivors and search their thoughts. Maybe I could warn you guys in time. Maybe we could try to warn Jason."

"Such a feat would be next to impossible," Ferrin said. "Even if you were to succeed, I don't see how you could get to Maldor in time to make any difference."

Once this army crosses into the valley, we'll have passed the point of no return."

"So do we alert Galloran?" Tark asked.

"He is a very intelligent man," Ferrin said. "Galloran may have already accepted that our tiny shred of hope might be based on bad information and therefore entirely unfounded. It might already be part of the measured risk that he is taking."

"Had you thought this through already?" Rachel asked.

"Not to this extent," Ferrin admitted. "And I am more skilled than most at sniffing out possible intrigues."

"This is not just a risk Galloran is taking," Tark said. "It is a risk all of Lyrian is taking along with him."

Ferrin sighed. "I suppose it is our duty to make sure he has weighed this possibility."

"I'll second that," Tark said.

"We might not be right," Rachel fretted.

Ferrin began to fidget by repeatedly disconnecting his index finger and reattaching it. "A plausible theory is only a plausible theory. Possible is not the same as true. Heeding this conjecture could divert us from what was actually a valid prophecy."

"But if we're right?" Rachel pressed.

Ferrin looked away. "Then this war was over long ago."

# SWORDS IN THE NIGHT

Nobody had come to wake Jason yet, but the commotion could not be ignored. Heavy footsteps outside his cabin combined with shouted exchanges on deck had him rolling out of bed and tugging on his boots. He recognized panic and dismay in some of the exclamations. Jason strapped on his sword, picked up his shield, and bolted from the room.

Outside his cabin Jason nearly collided with Corinne, who was still buckling her sword belt. "What is it?" she asked.

"Not sure," Jason answered.

Drake appeared beside them. He looked grim. "Good, you're up. We have an unwelcome visitor."

"Who?" Jason asked.

"Come see."

Corinne and Jason followed Drake up to the deck. The sails hung limp. The *Valiant* had been stuck in a calm since yesterday morning, with only the sweeps and the faint currents to nudge the ship along.

The upside was that the same calm would be hampering their pursuers. Three days ago they had made a clean escape from Windbreak Island, and they had not sighted an enemy ship since.

Except right now everyone was crowded to the starboard side of the deck, staring out at the water. Jason moved into position for a look. Corinne stayed beside him. She had not vomited since leaving Windbreak Island.

The night was still, the water nearly flat. A bright moon diminished the stars around it and left a gleaming trail on the tame ripples of the dark sea. Backlit by the moon, a tenebrous personage walked on the water toward the ship, holding a pair of swords upright, the silvery blades glinting in the moonlight.

"Oh no," Jason whispered, his insides constricting as chills of terror tingled across his shoulders. Two swords meant it was here to duel somebody. What would they do? They needed Galloran for this.

"A lurker," Corinne gasped.

The black figure did not hurry. Each measured footfall caused almost imperceptible ripples on the water, as if the sea were nothing more than a wide, shallow puddle.

Unable to look away, Jason stared in terror. The lurker was here to kill someone, and there was nobody to stop it. Anyone who intervened would die as well. Who had it come to kill? He tried to deny the awful certainty, but he knew. It had come to kill the person who needed to reach Darian. It had come for him. He was going to die.

Jason turned to Drake. "What do we do?" he asked quietly.

"We can't outrun it," Drake replied. "Probably not even if we had wind. You've seen how they can move when they choose. Unless we attack it, a torivor bearing swords can only duel one of us. Our only option might be to play its game."

"I can feel its mind," Corinne said. "It isn't being clear about who it wants."

Jason fingered the charm necklace Rachel had given him. Was there a way out of this? "What if we all hit it at once?"

Drake shook his head. "Then we open the door for it to kill us all. We can't take that chance. Our errand is too crucial."

As the torivor drew near to the ship, most of the drinlings fell back. Jason, Corinne, and Drake retreated to the far side of the deck, losing their view of the ominous visitor.

"Did you know they could walk on water?" Jason asked.

"I did not," Drake replied. "Almost seems like cheating."

"The lurker that followed me seemed to avoid water," Jason remembered.

"It might have been trying to conceal the ability," Drake guessed. "Running water?"

"Yeah, streams," Jason said. "Think that makes a difference?"

Drake shrugged. "Perhaps. It's having no trouble here."

Jasher approached Corinne. "Can you discern who it wants?" he asked urgently.

She shook her head. "I'm trying. It keeps repeating that we're going to fail. I can't sense anything else."

"Most likely targets?" Jasher asked generally.

"Us," Drake replied. "Those of us who were sent by the oracle. If Maldor knows what he's doing, Farfalee, Corinne, Jason, and Aram would top the list."

Jasher gave a nod. "Farfalee already translated the instructions and marked up the maps, making her less essential. Aram is very important while we remain on

the water. I don't want to say too much. Could it still be selecting a target? I don't want to risk influencing it."

"It has nearly reached the ship," warned a worried drinling.

"Do not engage!" Farfalee called. "We went over this back in Durna. A lurker bearing swords can only slay one of us, unless we attack it. One of us may have to pay the toll for the rest of us to proceed."

A chill ran up Jason's back. It was him. He would have to pay the toll. Could he be wrong? Maybe he was wrong.

"Failie," Drake said. "What about the worst-case scenario?"

Farfalee deferred to her husband. "Jasher?"

"We do what must be done," he said.

"What worst-case scenario?" Jason wondered.

"If it wants somebody, we can't lose," Drake replied.

"It's coming aboard," a nervous drinling announced, retreating aft. An instant later the torivor came over the side of the boat and landed nimbly on the deck.

"Steady," Aram grumbled. "Give it space. Don't offer it an excuse to retaliate."

Both swords held ready, the torivor turned in a slow circle. No moonlight reflected off its dark form. It was blacker than the sea, blacker than the space between the stars. It made no sound. The shadowy entity stopped turning and faced Jason.

Deep down, Jason had known it was here for him. From his first glimpse of the sinister figure striding upon the water, he had felt an instinctive certainty. His mouth was dry. He could feel his pulse in his hands and throat.

Jason had seen lurkers in action. He was dead. He wouldn't last a second. There was no place to hide, no way to defend himself.

What if he jumped overboard? It could walk on the water. It would follow him. It would stab him to death in the sea.

Despite the hollow doom in his chest, Jason tried to hold himself together. An irrational part of him wanted to run, to hide, to scream. Glancing at his friends, he saw their concern, and he tried to take strength from their presence.

He was dead! There was nothing he could do. He knew he had been playing a dangerous game. He had theoretically known it might end this way. But part of him had resolutely expected to survive.

That was not going to be the case. Staring at the impassive torivor, Jason knew his life was over. It was almost as if it had already happened. What was he



supposed to do? He tried to imagine how Galloran would handle the situation. Galloran would kill the lurker. But what if Galloran knew he couldn't kill the lurker? He would face it with courage. Like a hero.

Jason straightened. Tears threatened, but he refused them. Since his death was unavoidable, he should try to face it with courage. The lurker might take his life, but it had no power over his dignity. He would try to die well. It would give him something to focus on. He wished he could stop his fingers from trembling.

What about the quest? There was not much to be done about that. This would have to be all right. He had no alternative. The others would have to go on without him, finish the mission. He had known at the start that he might lose his life. He had known that sacrifices were coming. Others had already died bravely. Why should he always be protected?

Hopefully, his death wouldn't spoil the quest. Maybe his role had been to figure out how to destroy the Maumet. He had wondered why the oracle had placed an emphasis on him. He might have already done his part. The others would collect the information from Darian. It could all happen without him.

Jason tried to slow his breathing. He didn't want to die! He tried to plan. He had practiced with his sword. Maybe if he gave it everything he had, he would survive for a few seconds. Or maybe he should just stand there and force the lurker to strike him down in cold blood. Why give it the satisfaction of pretending to fight?

"It knows you," Corinne said. "It's trying to reach you."

Jason gave a nod. The charm necklace would prevent mental contact. His psychic inability might also block communication.

"It shared dreams with you," Corinne murmured, rubbing her elbows as if she felt a chill.

"Lurky?" Jason asked. Was this the same lurker he had met shortly after his return to Lyrian?

The air remained still, the sea quiet.

Jason resolved that if the lurker insisted on a duel, he would try his best. Whether a lucky victory was possible or not, he would feel better if he went down swinging. Maybe it would help distract him from the pain of the fatal blow.

The torivor extended one of the swords, the blade pointed directly at Jason. The dark being turned the weapon upright and tossed it to him, the sword traveling at the perfect angle for Jason to catch the weapon by the hilt.

As Jason reached out his hand, Drake stepped in front of him and intercepted it.

The lurker rushed forward, forcing Drake to deflect a flurry of swings. The blades chimed musically, each ringing collision reverberating over the water. Drake circled to his right, and the lurker stayed with him, pressing the attack. The seedman barely parried blow after blow.

Jason watched in a daze. The weight of his impending death had settled so firmly in his heart and mind that he felt astonished by the interruption. Drake was trying to save him. Jason felt a wrenching mix of gratitude and horror. Could the seedman possibly win?

Jasher stole the sword from Jason's sheath and joined the fight, attacking the lurker from behind. With preternatural grace, the torivor engaged the two seedmen at once, not only protecting itself but still actively attacking. Blood sprayed from Jasher's arm. Before the droplets had landed on the deck, Drake received a quick stab in the thigh.

A drinling up on the mast hurled a knife at the torivor. Without disrupting its attacks on Drake and Jasher, the lurker swiped the knife with its sword, like a batter connecting for a homerun. After the clang of contact, the knife streaked through the air into the chest of the man who had thrown it. He tumbled from the mast to the deck, landing loosely.

A scratch on Jasher's cheek. A shallow slash across Drake's side. Both seedmen were scarcely stalling death. They doggedly resisted the inevitable with all of their skill, but they could not possibly win.

Corinne drew her sword, and Farfalee was immediately at her side to restrain her. "No," the seedwoman demanded.

"But maybe—" Corinne protested.

"No," Farfalee repeated with finality.

Galloran had drilled all of the best swordsmen on how to fight torivors, not necessarily because he thought they could learn to defeat them, but rather to elevate their overall skills. Jasher had received the expert training, as had Drake, Corinne, Ferrin, and Aram. Galloran had shown them patterns the torivors preferred and how to defend against them. Jason had watched some of the sessions. It had been intense. Jason suspected that as skilled and experienced as Jasher and Drake were, without that training, they would have already fallen.

The chiming swords moved in a frantic blur. With flawless precision the lurker continued to alternate blows, in front and behind, striking ruthlessly,

leaving no openings. Jasher was stabbed in the eye. Drake lost his free hand just above the wrist. Both seedmen kept fighting.

Jason realized that when the seedmen died, he would still have to take up his sword and fight his duel. They shouldn't have intervened! He was more grateful for their sacrifices than he could have ever expressed, but now three of them would die instead of one!

"Get ready!" Drake yelled. "Don't miss this!"

Whipping his sword fiercely, Drake charged forward. The lurker stabbed him through the chest, the blade piercing his titan-crab breastplate as if it were cardboard. Dropping his sword, legs churning to keep his momentum, Drake wrapped both arms around the lurker, hoisting it off the ground. The legs flailed. A dark fist pounded Drake on the shoulder. For an instant the lurker hung in the air immobilized.

And Jasher stabbed it through the back.

The torivor vanished with a blinding flash.

Jasher pulled the tip of his sword out of Drake and caught him as he slumped forward. Farfalee darted to them and helped her husband lay her brother on the deck. Jason and Corinne drew near.

Drake coughed wetly. One shoulder was misshapen, buckled where bones had snapped. As he rested on his side, the hilt of the torivor's sword protruded from his chest, the sleek blade from his back. Blood drained from his many wounds.

"We need a tourniquet on that arm!" Farfalee instructed.

"Failie," Drake chided softly, "I've . . . done this before. I'm past . . . the reach of medicine." He coughed again. His eyes shifted to Jasher. "We got it."

"Yes," Jasher said. "That was the bravest act I've ever seen."

"Always wanted to . . . go out with style."

"Drake," Farfalee managed, her face rigid. "Drake, I . . ." Her fragile composure shattered into sobs.

"Don't," Drake said. "I know. I love you too." His eyes shifted back to Jasher. "You killed a torivor!" The statement was powered by a moist chuckle. "First Galloran . . . now two can claim it."

"Three of us," Jasher corrected. "You more than I."

Drake closed his eyes tightly and clenched his jaw. He was having trouble breathing.

Jason couldn't hold back any longer. He knelt beside his friend. The words came in a rush. "Thank you, Drake. You saved my life. I wish you hadn't. I'm so sorry."

Drake grabbed Jason's forearm with his remaining hand. The grip was strong. Jason tried to ignore the leaking injuries. "No, Jason. No apologies. You saved me." He coughed several times. "I was . . . already dead. No amar. Squandered it. I could have ended . . . alone . . . a failure. Hating myself. This is better. Much better . . . than I deserve."

Jason felt vaguely aware of Corinne's hand on the back of his neck. He could not restrain his tears.

Drake released Jason and became lost in a fit of coughing and gasping. Jason wanted to turn away. Drake would die any second. But he could not turn his back on his friend, just in case those eyes opened again.

They did. "Take it out," Drake murmured.

Jasher crouched, bracing one hand against Drake, and withdrew the torivor's sword, the blade scraping against the cracked breastplate as it came free. No gore clung to the sleek weapon. Jasher cast it aside.

Rolling flat onto his back, Drake shuddered. Then he inhaled deeply. He stared up at the night sky. "We're going to win," he said, his voice calmer, less strained. "This is nothing. Keep going. They can't stop us. Jason, give Rachel the necklace. Tell her . . . tell her I'm sorry. Tell her . . . I wanted . . . to show her . . . my little valley. Tell her I tried."

His voice was growing weak. Farfalee smoothed a hand over his brow. "Shhh," she whispered. "Be still, Drake. You can rest now. You did it. Rest. We'll take it from here."

"Failie," he whispered, his hand twitching toward the back of his neck with little jerks. "Where's my seed?" His head tipped sideways. The breath went out of him.

Farfalee went stiff, her expression impassive, damp eyes sparking in the moonlight. Jasher placed his hands on her shoulders to still her trembling. She looked over her shoulder. "You're hurt!"

Jason looked at Jasher. Blood seeped from one eye. His upper arm bled. Jason had been so focused on Drake that he had almost forgotten about the other injuries.

"Nothing fatal," Jasher said. "I'll survive. The eye is shallow. Barely reached me. I might not even lose it."

Heg took Jasher by the elbow. "Come," he said. "Let me see to your wounds."

Jasher nodded, releasing Farfalee. She stood straight, struggling to hide her grief. Corinne hugged Jason. He hugged her back. She felt too slender. She had lost weight while seasick. The effort to comfort him seemed distant and

insufficient, but he appreciated the attempt. Despite her presence, despite everyone aboard the ship, Jason had never felt more alone. The profound sense of loss left him empty, but not numb. Drake was gone. He tried not to look at the body.

“Where is our wind?” Jasher cried as Heg led him belowdecks. “Aram, more wind!”

“I’ll see what I can do,” the half giant growled.

# THE WESTERN PASS

On a bright morning, as Rachel prepared to mount her horse, a soldier sheepishly approached her. His tentative attitude did not match his large stature or his sharp uniform. He held a small scroll. He looked a bit like a child who had been dared to venture alone into a graveyard.

“Pardon me, milady,” he said. “A moment of your time?”

“What can I do for you?” she asked, trying to sound friendly.

“Nothing, milady. I have a message for you from the king.”

Rachel noticed Tark and Ferrin watching the exchange from a short distance away. She held out a hand, and the soldier passed her the scroll. She broke the seal and read it. Her veil caused a little interference, but the message was brief. Galloran meant to come speak with her tonight.

“The king is welcome anytime,” Rachel said, returning the scroll to the soldier.

With a little bow he backed away, then turned and walked off. Did he seem relieved? Rachel thought so.

As she mounted her mare, Rachel wondered how a conversation with Galloran would go. She had a lot of pent-up feelings. Part of her looked forward to a visit from him; part of her dreaded it. Her fears about the validity of the prophecy remained unresolved.

Each day that the army advanced without trouble reminded Rachel of their danger. The emperor knew they were coming but did nothing to hinder them. And why should he? His enemies were handing him victory. Rachel would not have been shocked to find complimentary refreshments waiting along the roadside.

Ferrin had conferred with Galloran. The displacer had reported that it was hard to read whether the king had already taken the possibility of a false prophecy into consideration. In the end Galloran had firmly maintained that they could not turn back.

Ferrin and Tark had accepted the verdict. Rachel was not comfortable with the decision but felt she had to hide her dissatisfaction. She had already vented her concerns through Ferrin. Her misgivings had been considered, and Galloran had made his choice. The others had moved on. Who was she to keep complaining? Who was she to be more doubtful than a displacer? Who was she to question a king?

Rachel took her place near the front of the column. Tark and Ferrin followed a respectful distance behind. Over the past days Rachel had found her confidence in Galloran eroding. Since their last meeting he had spoken with her twice on the road—short, pleasant conversations. Superficial conversations. He had not mentioned his discussion with Ferrin, and neither had she. The topic had not seemed appropriate anywhere they might be overheard.

Galloran had not reached out to her mentally for days. Rachel had decided not to trouble him by using her private telepathic access. If he wanted to communicate, he could reach out any time he wanted. He had a private tent.

Now he had announced that he would be paying her a visit, but not until the evening. She was left to stew about her concerns. The more she thought about the potentially false prophecy, the more disappointed she became in Galloran for dismissing such a likely danger, and the less she wanted to think about him, let alone speak with him.

After a long day alone with her thoughts, Rachel felt a blend of terror and relief when Galloran appeared at her tent that night. Only Io accompanied him. Ferrin and Tark left the tent, and Io stood guard at the door.

With a low groan Galloran sat beside Rachel on her cot and put on his blindfold. “Ferrin is worried about you,” he said without preamble.

“I’m all right,” Rachel lied.

“I regret that I have been so occupied,” Galloran said. “There is much to manage.”

“I don’t want to be an extra burden,” Rachel assured him.

“Ferrin suspects that you continue to fret about the validity of the prophecy.”

Rachel stared at his blindfold. Maybe her friends weren’t as oblivious to her worries as she had assumed. She realized that she was pausing for too long. “Actually, yes. I’m still suspicious that Maldor could have used the oracle to direct us right where he wants us.”

“I can see how this idea would trouble you,” Galloran said. “The possibility would make you feel as though my misapprehension was leading us into a

massacre. You would feel bound by duty to quietly accept my ruling, even though that very silence could be killing us all.”

“Something like that. I don’t want it to be true. It just really seems to fit.”

Galloran nodded. “The absence of resistance has created a terrible suspense among my soldiers. I feel the tension as well. Let me share what comfort I can offer. I knew Esmira better than most, both personally and through my aunt, the Pythoness. You realize that I could see her mind when we conversed. I searched hard and found no trace of deception.”

“That’s comforting,” Rachel said.

“I did not expect deception from her. Esmira had an impeccable reputation. But I was aware of the potentially devastating consequences that could arise from even the smallest untruth. We were in a predicament where any degree of wishful thinking could have led us down a futile and deadly path. During my interview and when she issued the prophecy, I scrutinized both her demeanor and her mind. I am satisfied that the prophecy is authentic.”

“Could Maldor have deceived her?” Rachel asked. “Could he have used torivors to plant a false prophecy?”

“The Temple of Mianamon is heavily shielded against mental intrusion,” Galloran explained. “And perhaps no place in Lyrian is better insulated than the chamber where she gave us the prophecy. I sensed no torivors in our vicinity at any time after I won the duel at the Last Inn. Furthermore, even had torivors been granted access to Esmira, they would not have been able to confuse an oracle of her quality.”

Rachel sighed. The responses made sense. But she still couldn’t relax. “If she was so powerful, couldn’t the oracle have guarded her mind against you knowing she was lying?”

“Possibly,” Galloran admitted, “though I don’t believe she would have been so foolish as to trust a bargain with Maldor.”

“What if he meant it?” Rachel persisted. “What if Maldor doesn’t care about the jungle? What if he promised to leave it alone if she helped him? What if she looked into the future and saw that he would really do it? What if she saw that the rest of Lyrian was lost either way, but that deceiving us would at least save the children of Certius?”

“You have really thought this through,” Galloran said.

“Is there a chance I’m right?”

Galloran paused before answering. “I suppose there is a chance.”



“Doesn’t it fit what Maldor would do? Doesn’t it seem like what he did with the Word?”

“It does. I just don’t believe Esmira would stoop to dealing with Maldor under any circumstances. And I don’t believe the emperor would offer to spare the jungle. Not in sincerity. His objective is total domination. He is certainly in position to achieve it. He did not need her help to defeat us.”

“He didn’t need the Word, either,” Rachel argued. “He just likes to experiment with better ways to control everybody. He likes finding easier ways to win. He likes getting his enemies to destroy themselves.”

“I see how this must have been eating at you,” Galloran said. “You describe a plausible scenario.”

“I’m worried that he’s controlling us,” Rachel said. “What if he’s using your faith in the prophecy against you?”

“It’s possible,” Galloran conceded. “But what if our faith is the only attribute that can save us? What if your fear of Maldor is making you imagine a conspiracy where none exists?”

“That’s the problem,” Rachel said. “I’m not sure I’m right. But a fake prophecy makes lots of sense. If I knew I was right, I’d make everyone listen. But I’m not sure. Not a hundred percent. I can’t be sure. I have no proof. There probably wouldn’t be any proof.”

“If it is any consolation, I cannot be absolutely sure either,” Galloran said. “We can seldom be utterly certain about any choice.”

“I could live with having only a small chance of victory,” Rachel said. “I could handle the fact that we would probably lose. If our decision were between a small chance and no chance, I agree, we take the small chance. But I’m having a hard time dealing with the possibility that our small chance of winning might be based on a lie.”

“If the prophecy proved to be erroneous, do we have a better road to travel?”

“We could live longer,” Rachel said. “Who knows what other options we might discover? If the prophecy is a lie, there might be some other way to beat Maldor that we haven’t noticed. Some hidden vulnerability. There might not be just this one crazy path the oracle showed us. Like with the Word, the prophecy could be a distraction from better ways to reach our goal.”

“I’m not sure what vulnerability that could be,” Galloran said. “Many of us, including the wise among the Amar Kabal, have sought such a weakness for decades. Maldor just keeps getting stronger. In truth, I was concerned that the oracle would see no road to victory. But she did. And so I am trying to walk it.”

Rachel did not respond. She had tried for days to imagine a possible vulnerability but had come up with nothing. This moment was no different.

"I could send you home," Galloran said, breaking the silence.

"What?"

"We're marching to Felrook with an army. We have Ferrin. Whatever perils await us, I'm sure we could smash the defenses protecting the portal to your world."

"But wouldn't that mess up the prophecy?" Rachel asked. "We have to stand united. That doesn't sound united."

"If you aren't committed to this course of action, we won't be united. In that case, I would rather see somebody survive. I never meant to force you to help us."

Rachel thought about it. Galloran was right. He could probably send her home. She hadn't considered the option. But what about Jason? What about everyone? Was she really willing to give up? Did she really think the prophecy was false? She had worried that Galloran had been deluded, but he had clearly thought this through at least as deeply as she had. Were her misgivings just a product of her nervousness?

"I feel lost," Rachel finally said.

"Doubts can be that way," Galloran said. "Once they take hold, they can seem very real."

"What if they *are* real?" Rachel fretted.

"If there were no chance they could be real, the doubts would hold no power."

"Don't you have doubts? What do you do? Ignore them? How do you deal with them?"

Galloran rubbed his mouth and chin. "When I have doubts about a decision, I search for a better alternative. In this situation I see none. The only alternatives are different versions of waiting to be conquered. My next step is to examine the reasons I have to believe. I am confident that Esmira was a true oracle. I am confident that she would not have dealt with Maldor. I did everything in my power to verify the truthfulness of her words and came away satisfied. If I find my reasons satisfactory, I cast aside my doubts and proceed. Show me proof that my doubts are real, and I would feel differently. Show me a better alternative, and I would reevaluate my position."

"That makes sense," Rachel said. "It's just so hard. Attacking Felrook seems so hopeless. I can't imagine what secret Jason could learn that would make a

difference.”

“That is where faith becomes necessary,” Galloran said. “I can’t envision what he will learn either. If I could, Jason’s quest would be pointless. Faith isn’t knowledge, Rachel. Faith is a tool. Faith keeps us going until we get the knowledge. Faith keeps us striving until we reach the consequences of our most important decisions.”

“What if we have faith in something that’s wrong?” Rachel asked.

“Then we’re heading for disappointment. But even misplaced faith can help us gain knowledge. We try to be smart about where we put our faith. And we adjust as we learn more.”

“You’re convinced the prophecy is real,” Rachel said.

“I’m convinced. If I thought it was false, I would turn this army around. I do not wish to hand Maldor an easy victory.”

“So I just need to forget about my doubts?”

“That choice is yours to make. If you mean to press forward, you must overcome your concerns. For anything worth accomplishing, we can always find reasons to doubt, just as we can also find reasons to proceed. I have weighed my alternatives. In these circumstances—with my fate in the balance, with your fate in the balance, with the fate of the world in the balance—I have chosen to side with faith and hope over doubt and despair.”

“We had faith in the Word,” Rachel reminded him.

“And the Word did not perform as we expected. It was not the end of the journey, as we had hoped, but it was part of the journey, perhaps a necessary part. Though I spent long years in the dungeons of Felrook, I do not regret my faith in the Word. That faith helped me eventually learn the truth of the matter, and brought me to where I now stand.”

“Okay,” Rachel said.

“This army is marching to war,” Galloran said. “You must decide how you will proceed. I hope you will have faith in the prophecy and faith in my judgment. Without your participation I’m not sure we can win. But if you ask it of me, Rachel, I will send you home. I can always press onward hoping that your role has already been fulfilled.”

Rachel didn’t need time to consider a response. She respected and loved Galloran. She had promised Nedwin that she would protect him. She couldn’t imagine ditching him. “I won’t abandon you. I won’t abandon Jason and everyone. This conversation has helped me. I think I can manage my worries now. I’m sorry if I’ve been a pain. I didn’t want to see us tricked because I didn’t

fully explain myself. Your thinking makes sense to me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I went home now. We have to try."

Galloran patted her shoulder. "We're lucky to have you. You're a very intelligent young woman. Please come to me if you have other concerns or if you perceive other alternatives."

He stood, removed his blindfold, and exited the tent. Ferrin and Tark returned a moment later.

Ferrin looked a little shamefaced. "Sorry. I talked to Galloran behind your back. I could tell you were having a difficult time, and I thought he could help better than anyone. I hope I didn't make you too uncomfortable."

Rachel hugged the displacer. "Thanks, Ferrin. I needed that. Galloran helped me. I feel a lot better."

Ferrin gently pushed her away, his hands on her upper arms. "Are you sure? Or are you pretending to be satisfied?"

"I'm pretty sure," Rachel said. "There's no way to erase all doubt, but Galloran gave me enough reasons to trust the prophecy again."

"We're marching into a death trap," Ferrin clarified. "The prophecy never promised success. None of that has changed."

"I know," Rachel said. "We still have plenty of reasons to stress out."

"The period before a battle can be worse than the battle itself," Tark said. "It certainly taxes my nerves more."

"I agree," Ferrin said. "Best not to obsess about it. From all appearances we will not have to concern ourselves with battle, not until we reach the western pass. For now we merely need to survive long marches and cool nights. Shall I brew some mint tea?"

Rachel and Tark approved.

\* \* \*

As more days went by, the army passed through a region of fertile farmland and prosperous villages. Most of the people hid as the army approached. A handful of volunteers joined them. Up ahead, the Graywall Mountains drew nearer. Rachel knew that Felrook awaited behind those mountains, but she remained at peace with the decision Galloran had helped her reach.

When the army neared the mouth of the western pass through the mountains, they found a force of four hundred awaiting them—a hundred covered in moss, a hundred clad in ivy, a hundred draped in vines, and a hundred bristling with black thorns. Four of the more skilled acolytes who

Rachel remembered from Mianamon stood at the front of the company, wearing stately gray robes.

Rachel enjoyed catching up with the acolytes, even if they regarded her odd apparel with uncertainty and treated her with remote courtesy. Rachel hadn't been close to any of them, but they brought news that Ulani and the other women were well; not to mention they provided practical support for the upcoming battle.

Galloran had prepared his men to expect the help of the treefolk, but Rachel could tell that many of the soldiers viewed their new allies with emotions ranging from suspicion to wonderment. After meeting with the acolytes and some of the leaders among the treefolk, Galloran decided to employ the majority of the treefolk as scouts at present.

The day after pausing near the mouth of the pass, the Amar Kabal joined them. Thousands in number, the seedfolk were all mounted, the women favoring longbows, the men carrying swords and spears. Their armor looked light and fancy compared to the protective gear worn by the army from Trensicourt, and their weapons were of much more elegant workmanship. The seedfolk brought with them hundreds of orantium spheres, including more than twenty of the larger gatecrashers.

Among the Amar Kabal, Rachel was pleased to discover several familiar faces. Andrus and Delissa were with them. Andrus told Rachel of how he had collected Delissa's amar after she'd been blown into a deep gulf while trying to pass through Howling Notch. Delissa appeared younger than before, bright-eyed and fresh-faced, and seemed eager to test her marksmanship in the upcoming conflict.

Lodan, the only son of Jasher and Farfalee, was also with the host. Rachel told him all she knew about his parents and his uncle Drake. He looked unchanged from the last time she'd seen him, even though he had died in the interim. Since it had been his First Death, Lodan had been reborn at the same age as when he had perished. Jasher had been reborn not long before him, so standing together they would have looked like brothers.

Only one member of the Conclave accompanied the host. Rachel had last seen Commander Naman when he'd lost a duel against Galloran in the Seven Vales. He still had a high forehead and wide lips, but he looked so young!

Rachel, Ferrin, and Tark were included in the meeting when the scouts reported the state of the western pass. Rachel noticed that Ferrin seemed uncomfortable. He normally seemed in control, no matter the circumstances,

but today he was quiet and distracted. Was it a reaction to the presence of the seedmen?

“What do you mean the gates stand open?” Naman asked, pacing rather than sitting. He wore a cloak over his armor and carried a slender, intricately carved mace. Rachel watched him with interest, wondering how many of her doubts he would share.

“The wall is deserted,” the chief scout said. “The pass is undefended.”

“We found no guardsmen at either side of the pass,” a second scout confirmed. “The defenses at the wall have been dismantled. The barracks lie empty. We sent men up the mountainsides and found nothing. We are searching for a force on the far side of the pass, but as of yet we have uncovered no sign of life. Plessit, the first village beyond the pass, stands abandoned.”

“Very well,” Naman said. “Thank you for your report.” He turned to face Galloran, who sat blindfolded. “What do you make of this, King Galloran?”

“I do not like accepting such a blatant invitation,” Galloran answered. “The empty pass is clearly bait for a colossal trap. Maldor is not even trying to conceal his intentions. He knows what prophecy we heard and has elected to taunt us. By shamelessly luring us to proceed, he is testing whether we will see this through.”

“The sieges of Inkala, Kadara, and Highport have all been called off,” Naman said. “The imperial armies are racing west at an unprecedented pace.”

“I have heard the reports,” Galloran said. “The emperor waited to recall them until he felt sure we were committed.”

“Are we committed?” Naman asked. “The full might of Maldor’s armies will reach Felrook not many days after us. We can’t hold the eastern gap against them—it is a wide plain without a wall.”

Rachel tried to keep her expression neutral. Was it wrong that she was happy to see Naman testing Galloran? He was the perfect person to do it—not only was he one of the biggest skeptics in Lyrian, but he also knew a lot about battle strategy. She understood Galloran’s faith in the prophecy, but she didn’t want it to make him ignore common sense in his preparations. Naman would make sure that didn’t happen.

“The drinling host should reach the eastern gap on the morrow,” Galloran said. “Not that they could plug the gap any more realistically than we could. But the drinlings will be in position to fall upon Felrook with us.”

Naman snorted. “Perhaps you should rephrase that—they will be in position to gaze across Lake Fellion alongside us.”

“Perhaps,” Galloran agreed.

“The emperor has not bothered to mask his strategy,” Naman said. “Why not thwart him? Our march has served to break the sieges in Kadara. The cities can now resupply, and their forces can regroup. By withdrawing now, we accomplish much at little cost. We waste his movement of troops and extend the war in the east for years.”

Rachel had also considered this possibility. She watched Galloran with interest.

“He has no need to hide his strategies,” Galloran repeated. “He knows our only hope of beating him is to proceed and take Felrook. The prophecy demands that we march on Felrook, and it warns that Felrook must fall. If we turn back before reaching our goal, the prophecy will never be fulfilled. The war would be officially over. We would return home to await our demise.”

“Instead, we will go like livestock to the slaughterhouse,” Naman said. “Once we are through the pass, Maldor will take it back, no matter how many defenders we leave. We will be trapped, then killed, and then the war will really be over.”

“Not if we take Felrook before Maldor’s armies arrive from the east,” Galloran said.

“How do you propose we do that?” Naman asked.

“First, we take the keeps,” Galloran said. “As you know, three keeps surround Felrook. They are not protected by water. They allow Maldor to send out sorties against attacking troops. But if they fall, they would provide stout shelter for a besieging army.”

“The gatecrashers?” Naman asked.

“The gatecrashers will give us a major advantage against the keeps,” Galloran agreed. “Our displacer knows secret ways into two of the fortresses. We may be able to take a couple of them with guile.”

Rachel glanced at Ferrin. He noticed her attention and gave an uneasy smile.

“So we take the three keeps and the walls protecting the ferry,” Naman said. “Call it four keeps, since the ferry is essentially a fortress as well. What then? Those walls will not house our entire host. They will provide scant protection against the horde that will descend on us from the east.”

“Once we hold the keeps, we begin to study the problem of Felrook,” Galloran said. “We engineer a way to attack the stronghold.”

“You mean we wait for the other part of the prophecy,” Naman said. “We hope that your companions slay the Maumet, find a dead prophet, and gain

some inscrutable secret that will save us.”

“Essentially, yes,” Galloran said.

“This is folly,” Naman protested. “It is not too late to turn back.”

“We have had news from Lord Jason,” Galloran said. “Ferrin?”

Ferrin stood. “My ear is with Jason. He informed me this morning that they have destroyed the Maumet and escaped Windbreak Island.” Expressions of relief and excitement greeted the news. After a moment Galloran held up his hands, allowing Ferrin to continue. “They have the location of Darian the Seer in their possession. They have been heavily pursued. A lurker fell upon them, which they killed.” This announcement created another stir. Ferrin glanced briefly at Rachel. She wondered how they would have defeated a torivor without Galloran.

“Let him proceed,” Naman said.

“They spent several days caught in a calm; then other torivors, glimpsed in the distance, led a small fleet to them and chased them about the Inland Sea. They are finally preparing to disembark and journey over land to the last abode of Darian the Seer. They chose to share this information because they decided that if the emperor knew their movements, we deserved an update as well. A displacer cannot leak secrets that are already known. They hoped we would find their progress encouraging.” Ferrin sat.

“Indeed,” Naman replied, “I am relieved to hear that the second part of the prophecy has not yet unraveled into failure. Defeating the Maumet was an unexpected success. Yet we are all in agreement that Maldor has learned the prophecy and is using it against us.” Naman didn’t look at Rachel, but she cringed a bit anyway. “With foreknowledge of our movements he has undoubtedly created a perfect trap. We will be caught between an unassailable fortress and the full might of his armies. What information could possibly alter this unwinnable scenario?”

Galloran stood. “Just because you or I cannot comprehend the secret that can save us does not mean it isn’t real. We have good reason to believe such a secret exists. We must let that suffice.”

“You ask much,” Naman said.

“I do not ask it,” Galloran said. “The oracle saw what she saw. The truth she beheld asks this of us. We can resist our duty with logic, we can find reasons to turn aside, but the prophecy will not be fulfilled because we almost obeyed. We must finish what we have started. It will not be easy. We have been warned that



this endeavor will probably end in ruin. But we are here because it is our last chance.”

“You speak true,” Naman said. “It is why we came. Besides, if I protest, I may find myself prematurely in the ground again. We proceed on the morrow?”

“We do.”

Naman frowned slightly, but nodded. Rachel could tell he seemed satisfied, which was an encouraging sign. “How many men do we leave to hold the wall?” he asked.

Galloran rubbed his palms together. “Holding the pass will not win the war. If we fail to take Felrook, we will all perish. If Maldor wants the pass, he will take it regardless of how we defend it.”

“But it is a highly defensible position,” Naman said. “We should make him pay to have it back.”

“Probably sensible,” Galloran consented. “We will examine the wall when we pass it tomorrow. It will most likely be attacked from both sides. Those who remain there will not escape. We will guard it with an appropriate contingent of volunteers.”

They went into particulars about how the remainder of the march would be coordinated, including the missions of scouts throughout the valley, the integration of the Amar Kabal among the human troops, and how the orantium would be allocated. They outlined strategies for contending with manglers and giants. They discussed how the drinlings would be used in the upcoming fight.

As Galloran and Naman moved into discussions about supply wagons and the dispersion of resources, Rachel began to lose interest. She knew it was important to keep everybody fed, but she had nothing to contribute to the conversation.

She managed to catch Ferrin’s eye. *Is everyone all right?* she mouthed. He didn’t seem to understand, so she repeated the silent inquiry.

His face fell a little. Enough to tell her that something was wrong. *After*, he mouthed back.

Rachel could hardly sit still through the remainder of the meeting. Could one of her friends have been hurt? Killed? She tried unsuccessfully not to think about it. When the strategy session finally concluded, Rachel left with Tark and Ferrin.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the message from Jason before the meeting?” Rachel asked Ferrin once they were outside and had a measure of privacy. She moved her veil aside in order to see him better.

"I was having a private discussion with Galloran when Jason confided in me," Ferrin apologized. "As soon as I relayed the message, Galloran asked me to keep it a secret so that he could use it as surprise leverage when dealing with Naman. It only meant withholding the information from you for a few hours."

"I guess I can't blame you if Galloran specifically asked," Rachel said grudgingly. She wanted to make sure everyone was all right. At the same time, she was afraid to ask. "It's a good sign, right? That they got past the Maumet?"

"An excellent sign," Ferrin agreed. "Many have tried to defeat the Maumet to no avail. If one impossible task has been accomplished, why not more?"

"Jason is all right?" Rachel asked, her voice quiet, her body tense.

"Well enough," Ferrin replied. "They are under heavy pursuit. I am not surprised that Maldor sent torivors. Once the Maumet fell, his concern over their side of the prophecy would have increased a hundredfold. The emperor will throw everything he can between Jason and his goal."

"Are the others well?" Rachel asked.

Ferrin paused. He had that sickly look again. "Several drinlings have fallen. And I'm afraid I have bad news. One of our original delegation gave his life to defeat a lurker. It's a miracle they stopped a torivor without Galloran. It had come to slay Jason."

"Lord Jason is all right," Tark confirmed.

Ferrin nodded, his eyes on Rachel.

She paled. "Not Drake," she whispered.

Ferrin gave a slight nod.

Rachel felt cold and sick inside. How was it possible that Drake had gone out of the world and she hadn't known? She returned a little nod. "Oh."

"I know you were close," Ferrin said. "Jason said he died very bravely."

"I'm sure," Rachel said, trying to wall herself off, trying not to react to the terrible news. She wanted to lash out with Edomic. She noticed a boulder the size of a couch, and suddenly she wanted to throw it higher and farther than she had ever thrown anything. She wanted to crush it to dust. She wanted to tear the tent where she had just met with Galloran to shreds. She wanted to set the world on fire. In that moment of hurt and sorrow, she almost felt she could do it.

Instead, Rachel drew the dark veil in front of her face. For once her outfit felt completely appropriate to her mood. "Maldor will not get away with that," she finally managed.

"He won't," Ferrin said, giving her a hug.

Rachel let him hug her. She didn't want the contact at the moment, but Ferrin couldn't know that. He was trying to help. When the embrace ended, Tark took her hand and patted it. She could see the hurt in his eyes.

Rachel backed away. "I need some time alone."

Ferrin nodded.

Rachel turned, walking away from camp. She wished somebody would attack her. She wished Maldor had left defenders in the pass. She wished Maldor himself would come after her. He had sent that torivor. She had a message for him.

Somebody caught her arm from behind. Rachel turned. It was Galloran, his blindfold off, his eyes sympathetic.

"You heard my thoughts," she realized.

"They were impossible to miss," Galloran said gently.

"I don't . . .," she began, but couldn't continue.

*You don't know what you're fighting for if the people you most love are going to die,* Galloran conveyed mentally.

Yes, she replied. *And at the same time, I want to fight more than ever. I've never wanted to hurt somebody with Edomic before. I've hurt people in the heat of the moment, in self-defense, but I've never felt like I do now.*

*Leash those desires, Galloran cautioned. I understand how pain and grief can fuel rage. In this moment, riding this tide of emotion, you could wield Edomic as never before. But the effort would be wasted. You might harm yourself, and for what? To scorch a field? To lob a boulder toward the clouds? Store up the emotion. Save it for when you really need it. Don't weaken yourself before the true battle.*

His words brought her back. The urge to lash out diminished as her anger dissolved into heartache. She felt utterly helpless. "They killed Drake."

"We can't reverse what happened," Galloran said. "But we will make them pay."

# LANDFALL

I'm out of tricks," Aram said, lowering the spyglass. Eight ships were visible along the seaward horizon, sails bright in the moonlight, the steady glow of lanterns illuminating their decks. "And we're running out of water. There is no room left to maneuver. Taking the wind into account, I don't see an alternative to the docks."

Jason studied the ships converging from all directions. Not much had changed since he had sent the message to Ferrin a few hours ago. The enemy vessels had spread wide, driving the *Valiant* before them. As land drew nearer and escape options dwindled, the pursuing ships drew closer together, led by an interceptor called the *Intrepid*.

After the prolonged calm had finally subsided, the *Valiant* had sailed north. They wanted to stay away from Angial, the largest city north of the Inland Sea, because it had a garrison with hundreds of soldiers. They had been making for Jerzon, a fishing village well west of Angial, but with reasonably good access to the Fuming Waste. But before they could reach the village, lookouts had spotted a torivor on the water. It had not borne swords, but not long after the sighting, imperial ships had forced them to revise their plans.

Aram had led the imperial vessels on an epic chase. He had tried the same trick on the *Intrepid* that had sunk the *Avenger*, but the new interceptor had carefully avoided following directly in their wake. Apparently, word had gotten out.

Jason watched the drinlings prepping hot pitch for the little catapults. The *Valiant* would end her final voyage with a firefight. They did not intend to leave the interceptor seaworthy. Over the course of the chase they had lost the skiff and one of the launches, along with five drinlings and five orantium spheres. The drinlings in the launch had managed to hit one of the smaller ships with orantium before flaming pitch had set their open boat ablaze.

After days of desperate maneuvering, they were out of alternatives. They were now heading for the town of Gulba. Heg had apparently scouted the town

a few months ago. He had assured them that the town should house no more than twenty soldiers, but it did boast a pair of sizable piers and a large livery stable. The idea had been to steer toward Gulba, but to watch for a chance to slip through to a more northerly town. The wind and their pursuers had not cooperated, so now their options were either disembarking at Gulba or staging a battle on the water against eight enemy ships.

“Imperial schooner at the docks,” came a cry from above.

“What?” Aram called, racing to the other side of the deck. He peered toward land through his spyglass.

“We can expect extra soldiers in town,” Jasher said. He wore a patch over his injured eye and a bandage on his arm.

Even without a spyglass Jason could make out the dark form of the docked ship ahead. They just couldn’t catch a break! Now they would be sandwiched between strong forces.

“Eight of you should take the remaining launch and land away from the dock,” Heg said. “Let the *Valiant* draw away attention. We’ll bombard the schooner, the dock, and the incoming ships with pitch.”

“Might be our best choice under the circumstances,” Farfalee said. “We’ll leave behind an orantium sphere.”

“Take it,” Heg urged. “You need them both more than we will. I’ll stay and lead the effort. We’ll make sure the *Valiant* burns. We’ll fight until you’re away, then make our escape into the wild.”

Considering the large number of enemy troops involved, Jason wondered how many of the drinlings would survive to escape. Once again, others would risk their lives to try to get him to Darian.

“Who will go ashore in the launch?” Aram asked.

“Jasher, Aram, Jason, Corinne, Nia, and I,” Farfalee listed. “And two drinlings. Who do you suggest, Heg?”

“Del is our best remaining swordsman,” Heg said. “And Zoo has shown great composure under pressure.”

“We could probably squeeze ten into the launch,” Jasher said. “We might need the extra swords to win through to the horses.”

“Thag and Fet,” Heg said. “Our hardest fighters. Maces should serve as well as swords.”

“We had best prepare the launch,” Aram said. “The breeze is picking up. We’ll reach the dock swiftly.”

“Try to catch up with us,” Farfalee urged Heg. “Find horses if you can. It will be a long ride to the far side of the Fuming Waste. We can use all of the protection we can get.”

“If we win free, we’ll follow you,” Heg promised, “whether mounted or afoot.”

Jasher approached Corinne, holding Drake’s breastplate. “It cracked, but it will still serve. It’s light and will offer better protection than leather.”

“Thank you,” she said as she strapped it on.

Jasher turned to Jason. “I’ll carry one of our last orantium spheres. You carry the other. Don’t hesitate to use it.”

Jason accepted it gingerly. Orantium was a powerful weapon, but the prospect of an accidental detonation made him nervous.

Jason, Corinne, Jasher, and Farfalee all wore torivorian swords. Farfalee had offered hers to Aram, but the half giant had refused in favor of his own enormous blade. The ten companions climbed into the launch along with packs full of provisions. Thag and Aram manned the oars. The overloaded launch floated lower in the water than Jason liked.

As the launch diverged from the *Valiant*, Jason tried to pay equal attention to the coast and the enemy ships. The town of Gulba looked quiet, with only a few lit windows. It was neither a large town nor a tiny hamlet. The enemy ships were converging rapidly, chasing the *Valiant* into port like a pack uniting for the kill.

“Speed could save us,” Jasher whispered, loud enough to be heard over the sloshing oars and Aram’s jingling armor. “We nab horses and we get out of town.”

As the *Valiant* approached the dock, the drinling crew began launching fiery pitch at the schooner and the piers. By the time the interceptor collided with the opposite side of the schooner’s pier, flames were leaping from some of the dockside buildings and spreading across both piers. Fire climbed the schooner’s sails and blossomed aboard the *Valiant* as well.

The launch landed on a muddy little beach near a modest inlet sheltering smaller vessels. Farfalee sprang out first, a pack on her back, an arrow set to her bowstring. Alarm bells rang. Voices hollered. Figures could be seen running to the flaming docks, as well as disembarking from the *Valiant*. The *Intrepid* led the charge as the imperial flotilla sailed for the piers, driven by the rising wind.

Jason slung a pack onto his back, picked up his titan-crab shield, and stepped out of the launch and onto firm mud. Jasher and Aram held their swords ready, so Jason drew his as well, the blade silver-white in the moonlight. Positioned at

the right angle, the torivorian metal picked up orange highlights from the burning dock.

“Heg told me the way to the stable,” Zoo said. “Stay close.”

Jason was glad that somebody knew where they were going. From his current position he could see no evidence of horses or a stable. Away from the dock most of the buildings were lost in shadow. A few had soft firelight or luminous kelp glowing behind shuttered windows.

As the group trotted away from the launch, Jason questioned whether he should hold the orantium sphere ready instead of his shield. He decided that he could drop the shield and reach the sphere easily enough if needed. The sphere would not block arrows. Jason had practiced fighting with a shield at Mianamon but had spent more time with only a sword in his hand.

Zoo led them between buildings, keeping to the shadows wherever possible. Disorderly clusters of people ran toward the waterfront, some only half dressed, a few in uniforms. Most were too focused on the dockside fire to notice anything else, but as the group rounded a corner, a pair of uniformed men down the road paused, looking their way.

“Who goes there?” one of them asked, drawing a sword.

Farfalee answered with an arrow. As the other ran for cover, she dropped him as well.

Running lightly, Zoo led them down a side street. At the next corner Zoo halted, then peeked her head around slowly. “We found it,” she whispered. “There’s a guard outside with a crossbow.”

Jason was impressed with how clearly Zoo was speaking English now. The drinlings learned so fast.

Farfalee pulled an arrow to her cheek, stepped around the corner, and released. She nocked and released a second shot in a swift motion, then readied a third.

They sped to the large stable, a long wooden building with a gently sloped roof. From inside they heard horses stamping and whinnying. One seemed to almost scream. Zoo collected the fallen guard’s crossbow.

Thag and Aram yanked the big doors open. The stable contained sixteen stalls on each side. Three soldiers were working their way down the stalls, slaughtering the horses. They had started at the far end and only had a few stalls left.

The soldiers looked surprised as the doors opened. Thag and Aram closed swiftly. One soldier charged forward. The other two backed away, their dripping

weapons raised defensively.

Aram sidestepped a swing and clubbed the attacker with the flat of his blade. The soldier rebounded off the side of a stall and flopped to the floor. Racing past Aram, Thag engaged the next soldier, landing a crushing blow with his mace. The final soldier went down with an arrow through him. Aram stomped a heavy boot on the chest of the man he had toppled. "Where can we find more horses?"

"Gone," the man chuckled bleakly. "We set loose the steeds in the corral. I yield, by the way, if that matters."

Jason glanced around the stable. Only three horses remained standing.

"Three mounts," Jasher spat. "We have three horses."

A shadowy figure slipped through the door at the far end of the barn. Farfalee drew an arrow to her cheek, but hesitated. Zoo loosed a quarrel from her captured crossbow.

The figure caught the quarrel in one hand and rushed forward with inhuman speed. The lurker plunged the quarrel into Zoo, then stood back calmly.

Jason stared warily at the torivor. It stood so near, unmoving. His thoughts turned to Drake, and he felt queasy. At least the lurker had no swords. Still, what were they supposed to do now?

Thag approached the lurker from behind, mace raised.

"No," Aram ordered. "We need you." Aram looked down at the man beneath his boot. "How many horses did you scatter?"

Suddenly unwilling to speak, the man glanced at the lurker. The dark figure raised both arms. The horses in the stalls began to whicker and stamp. One reared.

Corinne raced at the lurker. Farfalee and Jasher both moved to stop her, but they did not react in time. Corinne held the tip of her sword level with the dark figure's chest. "Enough!" she cried angrily. "You've done enough!"

The torivor lowered its arms and retreated before her, shuffling back as she stalked forward. The tip of her sword shifted left at the same time as the lurker attempted to dodge left, then back to the right an instant before it skipped to the right. She kept advancing. It kept retreating.

Jason held his breath and watched in horror. It was as if Corinne had stepped in front of a speeding train. Her destruction was inevitable. Sure, a torivorian blade could injure a torivor. But you had to hit it. Now that Corinne had attacked, she had opened the door for the lurker to retaliate. Jason couldn't get thoughts of Drake out of his head. The idea of Corinne sharing a similar fate was too much. If anything, Jason would have wanted to step in front of a lurker



to protect her, not the other way around! He knew too well how even an unarmed torivor could wreak havoc against opponents.

Raising his sword, Jason strode forward. Maybe if he could slip past Corinne, he could distract the torivor enough for Corinne to make a move. Jasher's hand clamped down on his shoulder firm enough to restrain him. "Too late," Jasher murmured. "The way is too narrow. This is up to her now."

Jason could see that Jasher was right. If he tried to dodge past her, he'd probably just end up distracting her and getting them both killed. The chance to help her had passed. He didn't resist the seedman's grasp. The sword in his hand made him feel like a poser. Jason wished he could rewind time. Nobody should attack an unarmed lurker! Why hadn't somebody tackled her? Why hadn't he tackled her?

"Get out," Corinne said steadily. "Leave and do not return or I will slay you."

Corinne stopped advancing and began to move her sword into a variety of defensive positions. The lurker would twitch and she would adjust. Jason found himself flinching with each tiny movement. She swiped at it, missed, and stepped back into a defensive stance. Her blade kept moving as if dueling an imagined foe, blocking invisible blows, occasionally poking forward in halfhearted thrusts. The lurker crowded toward her, knees bent, arms extended, feinting with its head and hands. She seemed to anticipate every feint, moving with the featureless creature instead of reacting to it.

Corinne shuffled back and lowered her sword to her side. The torivor flashed toward her at the same moment as she lunged, thrusting her blade forward. The lurker stopped just shy of the sharp tip. The torivor slapped at the flat of her blade, but she twisted it so the black palm tore open against the edge, bleeding light.

Corinne shifted the tip of her blade left, then right, keeping it pointed directly at the lurker as it sidestepped. The dark figure jumped up and back, sailing almost high enough to reach the rafters. Then it fell flat to the floor and blurred toward her legs. Corinne stabbed downward, the blade piercing the floorboards as well as the torivor. It disappeared with a blinding burst of light.

There was silence in the stable for a moment. Corinne looked over her shoulder at her friends, her expression tired and relieved.

Jason did not realize he had been frozen in horrified shock until it began to melt away. He blinked. She had survived. No, not just survived. She had killed it.

"Well done," Farfalee said, making no effort to hide her disbelief.

“How many horses?” Aram repeated menacingly, leaning his weight onto the fallen soldier.

The man beneath his boot looked flabbergasted. “She just . . . How did she . . . ?”

“We kill lurkers all the time,” Aram replied casually. He leaned more heavily on the man, his boot pressing down with rib-creaking force. “Last chance.”

Jason stood beside Aram, glaring down at the trapped soldier. The man glanced his way. He kept his expression hard.

“We scattered twenty or so,” the man huffed with difficulty. “Emptied the corral.”

Aram reduced the pressure. “Which way did they run?”

“Inland,” the man said. “You won’t catch them. It’s a wide wilderness. The darkling spooked them.”

“What other horses remain in town?”

“None,” the soldier replied. “They were all kept here. They made us get rid of our own horses as well. We just got the order. We were supposed to eliminate any means for you to escape by land.”

“There have to be outlying farms with livestock,” Aram said.

“Sure, here and there. Nothing close.”

Jasher, Farfalee, and Nia had already led the three remaining horses from their stalls. Thag had run past Corinne to watch the far door. Fet guarded the near door. Del knelt beside Zoo, leaning in close and feeling her neck. “She’s gone,” the drinling said, rising to help saddle the horses.

Jason looked at Zoo lying motionless. She had been so alive just moments ago. Another casualty from a lurker. Another fallen friend. When would it end?

“There has to be some mount you spared,” Aram insisted. “Do you have a commander?”

“Captain Finley and Morgan the mercenary are currently astride their mounts,” the man said. “That’s all. You’re lucky to have three. We knew you were coming. We were making quick work of it.”

“Jason, Corinne, and Farfalee will ride,” Jasher said. “They have to get away. The rest of us can fan out, head into the wilderness on foot, try to find our own mounts and catch up.”

“I don’t like it,” Farfalee said. “We’ll be too vulnerable.”

“We’ll be at your heels,” Nia said. “Drinlings can keep up with horses over long distances. We can’t outpace a gallop, but we can run day and night without tiring, eating as we go.”

Jason moved toward one of the horses. Corinne stood beside another, looking a little shell-shocked.

“Where is your commander?” Aram asked the soldier under his boot.

“What am I?” the man complained. “An oracle? I suppose he’s managing the defense of the waterfront.”

“The horses may not have strayed far,” Farfalee said. “Once away from the lurker, they could have slowed. We should go after them together.”

“Some of us could ride double,” Jason suggested. “Especially if it’s just until we find more horses.”

Farfalee nodded eagerly. “What if Jason and Corinne shared a mount? Jasher could join me, and Aram could take the third, just until we see if we can catch up to some of the scattered horses. We could bring extra bridles.”

“Those ships are bringing more troops than we can handle,” Jasher said. “You should get away while you can.”

“Those ships could also be used to—”

Jasher interrupted Farfalee by placing a finger on her lips. He nodded at the soldier on the floor. “We should wait before getting too specific.”

Jason looked at the man on the ground. His wide eyes lacked focus. His face gleamed with sweat.

“Are we finished with him?” Farfalee asked.

“Anything else to tell us?” Aram questioned.

The man licked his lips, eyes anxious. “Can’t believe that girl killed a darkling. That’s a sight I never expected to see. Quick as a rock viper, that one.”

Crouching, Aram clenched both arms in a snug hold around the soldier’s head and neck. The soldier soon went boneless. “He’ll stay that way for some time,” Aram promised.

“The ships in pursuit could shuttle soldiers ahead of us,” Farfalee continued. “Anyone watching the *Valiant* could tell we wanted to go north. If we escape from here, they might head us off. We need warriors who can help us fight our way through ambushes, and we need woodsmen who can help us avoid them.”

“Fine,” Jasher said, lighting a strand of luminescent seaweed. “It will be hard to track the horses in the dark, but not impossible. If it comes to it, you three ride ahead.”

“We need to move,” Aram said.

“Are you all right?” Jason asked as Corinne mounted up behind him.

“Better than the lurker,” she replied.

“That was amazing.”

“I could feel its mind,” she said. “Just like Father taught me. The concentration was tiring, but it could hide nothing. Even at the start I knew it would raise its arms and scare the horses right before it did. With it tracking us, I knew we’d never get away. Since it had no weapons, I decided to take a chance.”

“Incoming soldiers,” Fet warned from his position by the door. “Four. Wait, four and a rider.”

Having collected extra bridles, Jasher and Farfalee sat astride their horse.

“Go,” Aram urged. “I’ll claim the inbound horse.”

Nia climbed onto the third horse. Jasher and Farfalee led the way to the far end of the stable. Aram, Fet, and Thag crouched into position at either side of the stable door. As he rode down the central aisle of the stable, Jason noticed that not all of the stalls had dead horses inside. Some had been empty. He idly wondered whether the soldiers had saved their own horses, sending them off into the night to be collected later.

As Jason reached the door at the far end of the stable, soldiers came through the door near Aram. “We have a problem!” the lead soldier cried, hustling into the stable, trailed closely by the other three. “Fugitives fleeing on horseback!”

Fixated on the fleeing horses and the bodies in the aisle, the new arrivals did not see the danger lurking at either side of the door. Aram, Fet, and Thag attacked from behind, dropping all four effortlessly. Just before Jason lost his view into the stable, he saw Aram heading out the door, presumably to find the man on horseback.

The gate to the large corral hung open. They trotted over to it. Del stayed with them on foot, sword in hand, eyes roving the night. Jasher leaned down, studying the ground beyond the gate with a glowing strand of seaweed in hand. Behind them, from a distance, Jason heard the clamor of weapons and the shouts of many voices. Dockside flames rose above the rooftops.

Thag and Fet came running from the stable. Del climbed up to ride double with Nia. Aram rode around the side of the stable, looking too large for his newly captured horse even though it was the biggest of the four.

“They messed up,” Jason told Corinne. “They were trying to make sure we didn’t have any horses, but they left just enough for us to keep moving. Nobody will be chasing us on horseback. Not from here.”

She nodded. He noticed that her hands were trembling. It took him a moment to realize that the shock of her combat with the lurker must still be setting in. She had been so brave.

“You sure you’re okay?” Jason checked.

“I’ll be fine,” she replied. Her voice didn’t sound very convincing. “The swordplay wasn’t too hard. The mental side of it was . . . very taxing.”

“Thag and Fet,” Jasher instructed, “follow us on foot. Hopefully, we’ll find enough mounts for all of us.” The seedman picked a direction, and they took off at a canter, forcing Jason to drop his conversation with Corinne. He enjoyed the wind in his face and the feel of Corinne’s arms around him. A guilty part of him hoped it would be some time before they found more horses.

They did not encounter any of the scattered horses quickly. The noise of battle receded. Behind them the town was silhouetted against raging sheets of flame. Beyond the blaze, too many ships crowded the modest port, red highlights reflecting off sails. Jason felt bad for any innocents who would have to rebuild their homes or businesses.

Jasher repeatedly leaned down to check the ground. Three times he dismounted to study the tracks more closely. Once they doubled back a short distance, having lost the trail.

Eventually they found seven horses grazing together. Apparently, the terror of the torivor had left the horses, because they did not shy away as the group approached.

Aram claimed the largest, transferring his saddle. With some rearranging, they soon each had a mount. Jasher, Farfalee, and Del were prepared to ride bareback. And they had four extra horses for Thag and Fet to choose from.

They had not ridden their horses hard from the stable, since three were carrying double and one was carrying Aram. Plus, they had paused a few times, and there was no sign of pursuit, so they decided to wait for Thag and Fet to catch up. Before long they heard the drinlings approaching at a sprint. A moment later they heard a galloping horse.

“One horse?” Farfalee asked.

“I only hear one,” Jasher confirmed.

“Could Thag or Fet have found one?” Del asked.

“I heard two runners,” Jasher said.

“Heg or one of our crewmates?” Del wondered.

“Maybe,” Jasher said.

“The soldier at the stable named one other mounted man besides the captain,” Aram reminded them. “A mercenary.”

Farfalee slid off her horse and set an arrow to her bowstring. Aram dismounted and drew his sword. The hoofbeats of the approaching horse slowed,

then stopped. Thag and Fet ran into view. "A lone rider," Thag called. Then he pitched forward to the ground, a long arrow in his back.

"Take cover," Jasher warned, dropping from his horse, putting the animal between himself and the archer. Jason did likewise. After Jason landed, his horse walked forward. He hadn't kept hold of the reins! Lunging, he grabbed them and held the horse still. Near him, crouching behind her horse, Corinne pulled out her sword. Aram and Farfalee took positions behind boulders.

Jason's horse sidestepped restively. He patted the animal and murmured soothing words. Shield held ready, he stayed low, peering under the neck, worried about getting hit by an arrow. He still couldn't see their enemy. Glancing over at Corinne, he drew his sword.

"I'll ride him down," Del volunteered.

"No," Aram said. "You'll be an easy target. You won't get near him."

Running low, Thag and Fet reached them. The arrow still jutted from Thag's back.

"Hold fire so we can speak?" a deep voice called from the shadows perhaps fifty yards away.

"Your arrow told us all we need to know," Farfalee replied.

"I am alone," the voice responded. "Truce for a moment?"

"He just wants to learn our numbers," Jasher whispered.

"I count nine," the deep voice said. "One injured. All with horses. Shall we speak?"

"He's stalling us," Jasher whispered more quietly.

"We have nothing to discuss," Farfalee answered. "We must hurry. Run away, leave your horse, and we'll not harass you."

"You have plenty of mounts without claiming mine," the deep voice replied bitterly. "I despise incompetence. They should have left all their men at the stables until every horse was dead. Instead, they ran to the dock to fight the fire and watch the incoming ship."

Fet and Del were creeping toward the unseen speaker. A sudden arrow took Fet through the throat. Del fell flat behind cover. Jason pressed a little closer to his horse.

"Now you have eight," the voice informed them. "Sure you won't talk? You can't ride away if I keep putting arrows in you. I have plenty. I seldom miss."

Jasher gave his wife a nod. "Very well," she said. "Truce." She took her arrow from the string, but kept it in her hand.

A tall man dressed as a conscriptor strolled out of the night, using a metal bar like a staff. He wore no helmet, and his head was shaved bald. The glow of the burning waterfront shone behind him. He held a large crossbow at his side. A bow and quiver were slung over one shoulder. His armor and gear jangled softly with every stride. With a pang of distress Jason recognized him.

“Groddic,” Jasher said.

“I know most of your names as well,” the big man replied. “Farfalee, Jasher, Corinne, Aram, Nia, Dead Guy, Injured Guy, the other drinling who got down just in time, and of course my old friend Jason.”

Jason remembered Groddic from Felrook. The tall conscriptor had brought him to his holding cell after his audience with Maldor. Suddenly the horse seemed like pathetically insufficient cover. Jason tightened his grip on his sword. What kind of chance would he have against a soldier like Groddic? He was the leader of the conscriptors. He was the conscriptor who had defeated Galloran. Apparently, Maldor was very serious about stopping them.

“What do you have to say?” Farfalee challenged.

“First, I want to congratulate you,” Groddic said.

“He wants to stall us,” Jasher repeated.

Groddic glanced over his shoulder. “Your crew tried to hold us at the docks. They were promptly overwhelmed. Many men are coming for you, but they lack mounts. Getting rid of the local horses was how we should have stopped you. We didn’t get the job done, so we won’t stop you here. Not unless I kill all of you myself.”

Jason found Groddic’s nonchalance distressing. He was a lone man approaching a sizable group with several proven fighters, but not only did he act unconcerned, he almost seemed exasperated. Jason glanced over at Corinne. She watched solemnly.

“Please try it,” Aram invited.

“You’re a large man,” Groddic complimented. “None of you are incompetent. We keep losing torivors. That alone speaks volumes. It would be an interesting contest. I brought in Galloran, you know, years ago. I’ll bring you in as well.”

“Still stalling,” Jasher warned.

“Let’s get him,” Corinne whispered angrily.

Releasing his horse, Jason crossed to her and placed a hand on her arm to still her. He could feel her trembling.

“I joined the chase in Angial,” Groddic said casually. “The *Intrepid* waited for me to board her. Might have been a mistake. We just missed you at Windbreak

Island. Nice work there. I never thought we would see the end of that Maumet. If you hadn't—"

"What have you to say?" Farfalee demanded. "Stop prattling."

Groddic's expression hardened. "I don't have tempting offers. Any of you could have access to Harthenham. You could have close to anything at this point. But I know you won't quit. Jasher was right. I was stalling. I intend to slay the lot of you. I'm just picking my moment."

"I could put an arrow in your throat before you took a step," Farfalee said.

He gave an easy chuckle. "That would officially end our truce. I would like to see you try."

Quick as a blink, Farfalee pulled her bowstring back and let an arrow fly. It took Groddic through the throat. Thag and Del charged forward. Nia as well. Jason raced around Corinne's horse. He didn't want to wait for Groddic to come to him. He was tired of hiding behind others. Corinne charged alongside him.

Staggering, Groddic raised his crossbow and shot Thag in the center of his chest. The thickset drinling went down hard. Gurgling, Groddic blocked Del's sword—once, twice, three times—before Nia ran him through with her sword from his blind side and Farfalee pierced him with another arrow. Del stabbed Groddic as well.

Jason and Corinne stopped short. The fight had ended as they arrived. The tall conscriptor went down and did not move. Del hurried to Thag. Nia checked Fet.

Jason could hardly believe the speed of the fight. He stood frozen, eyes roving from Groddic to the fallen drinlings.

"We need to go," Jasher called. "His purpose was to harm us and slow us. Soldiers are coming. They will be on our trail. They will try to loop ahead of us. They will scavenge for horses."

"Fet is dead," Nia reported.

"Thag won't make it," Del said.

Jason could see Thag feebly waving for them to go. Jason's eyes became wet. They were losing so many good people! The stirrup creaked as he climbed onto his horse.

Farfalee mounted up. "We must away."

Nia stabbed the fallen conscriptor once more on the way to her horse. Jason wanted to add a stab or two of his own. That was the man who had blinded Galloran! He had just killed Thag and Fet! But there would be no point. It



would restore nothing. Jason nudged his horse forward, following Jasher into the night.

# TREACHERY

Nedwin had to fight his way awake. His senses knew that something was amiss, but he was in the middle of agony such as he could only suffer while asleep. After he'd lost the ability to feel physical pain, the sensation had begun to find new life in his dreams. The trauma had started innocently—a bone broken in combat, the dull ache of a bad tooth, a tumble into a campfire. Over time the dreamed pain had come to feel increasingly authentic, and nightmares of torture and the attending anguish had grown more common. After the worst dreams he would wake up shivering and drenched in sweat.

Nedwin had always been a light sleeper. The condition had spared his life more than once. But as the excruciating nightmares grew more immersive, he found himself snapping awake at minor disturbances less often.

Tonight he was once again imprisoned in the dungeons of Felrook. Some nights he suffered at the hands of Copernum, other nights Damak, and other nights Maldor himself did the honors. Currently he was under the power of a tormentor called Grim. It was the only name Nedwin had ever heard him called. He was a small man, with dexterous hands. Nedwin suspected that if Grim had learned the violin, he would have become a virtuoso. Instead, Grim had studied torture.

On occasion, while he was in the midst of dire torment, the pain and despair would be interrupted as Nedwin realized he was dreaming. In the past he had found ways to use that recognition to claw his way to consciousness. Over time, as the nightmares became more intense, it was getting harder for Nedwin to deliberately rouse himself from the agony. But the task was always easier when aided by outside stimulation.

Nedwin wrenched himself onto his side and opened his eyes, gasping, feeling like a drowning man who had finally found land. He did not sleep in his decadent bed. The softness felt foreign and made it harder to wake. Instead, Nedwin slept on the floor beside the bed, wrapped in some of the covers.

His hearing had been sharpened by years of receiving nervesong, a pain enhancer responsible for many of his most mind-rending agonies. Even after losing one ear, Nedwin still heard much better than he had as a child. Occasionally he would experience auditory hallucinations, but they tended to be inexplicable angry voices, and he had learned to separate them from actual sensory input.

Right now he heard faint noises rising from the city below—weapons clashing, glass shattering, assorted screams and shouts. The bells were not yet ringing, but they would probably start soon. A riot? An attack?

He detected disturbing clues from within the castle—the splintering crack of a forced door, dogs avidly barking in the kennel, the jingle of armor, a shout that cut off abruptly. Then he heard a sudden scuffle down the stairs from his room.

So the violence was inside the city, inside the castle, and already inside his quarters. Nedwin resisted a jolt of panic. He felt no fear for his life, but ample concern that his opportunity to fail Galloran had arrived. He had known in his gut, in his bones, that his position governing Trensicourt would come to this. He was too new to the politics involved, and too many schemers had stayed behind with feigned sicknesses.

The bells should be ringing. Had they been compromised? How had his opponents orchestrated this so quietly? Nollin had been working his growing network of contacts, and Nedwin had spent most of his time snooping privately, but neither had caught wind of this coup. Nedwin had expected treachery eventually, but smaller in scale and not so soon. He needed to start moving. He needed to learn the extent of the trouble and to see if there was any action he could take.

The two guards stationed outside his room were reliable men. He should warn them. They could leave with him. If they stayed to fight, they would die.

Nedwin rushed to the door on light feet, but paused as he heard the clamor of swordplay. Too late. Eli and Tomlin had already engaged the attackers. “Nedwin,” a voice shouted, “treachery!”

Belting on his favored short sword and placing a pair of orantium globes in a satchel, Nedwin dashed to the balcony. He never stayed anywhere without scouting multiple escape routes. If he got away, there would be time to return and face his enemies on his own terms. Best to disappear while they had the advantage.

The night was cool, the moon bright. Nedwin took a moment to stare from his balcony. Outside the castle wall Nedwin glimpsed a trio of giants rampaging through a cluster of soldiers. The overmatched humans stood no chance. Elsewhere a pair of riderless horses galloped wildly along a side street. Down in a courtyard Nedwin observed a large group of men driving back a smaller group.

For a moment he could not move. The event he had expected and feared had arrived—a massive coup on his watch. The city had fallen, the castle was falling, and he was the last to know. It had taken murderers at the door of his bedchamber to rouse him.

Even without hard evidence leading up to this night, he had no right to be shocked. How had he missed the giants? He had been vigilant! Clearly, he had not been looking in the right places. The giants must have been smuggled into the city as dwarfs. But when? How? He had watched for dwarfs! He had watched for conspirators! He had intercepted messages! He had eavesdropped on conversations! He had not been complacent.

*Never badger a badger. Never squirrel with a squirrel. Never swallow a swallow.* When enduring torture, Nedwin used to play word games in his mind, finding interesting combinations. In times of strife, strange word patterns would surface. *If you can't bear the bare bear, bore through the boring boar.*

This was no time to get flustered. This was no time to analyze his mistakes. There would be plenty of time later to rationally sort through what had gone wrong. He did not need to comprehend any of it yet. He had to act first and think later, or he would end up dead and no use to anyone.

A rope dangled beside the balcony. Nedwin had left it there deliberately. He quickly used it to climb to the top of the tower. The steeply sloped roof was not built for walking, but Nedwin was in no danger of falling. He loosed the rope and tied it again elsewhere, then climbed down to a lower roof that could take him places.

Nedwin could have claimed the king's quarters, but he had opted for the third tallest tower instead. Among other features it afforded better rooftop access to the entire castle.

Above him he could hear men trying to force the door to his room. It would take some time. The stout door was thick, and Nedwin had added three interior locks. Nedwin tugged on the rope. He wished he could take it with him to make his disappearance more mysterious, but he knew he had tied it well.

Where to now?

What allies might need him? Despite his high position, Nicholas had refused to relocate to the castle. A savvy decision, considering the present circumstances. Nedwin decided that he would go directly to Nicholas after escaping the castle. The forces behind this coup would not leave Nicholas untouched, no matter where he chose to live.

Nedwin started running along the rooftop, using a smooth, sliding pace and deliberately choosing where to place each step to minimize sound. He had to sacrifice a little bit of stealth for speed, but with all the commotion in and around the castle, he doubted anyone would notice his subtle creaks.

He should try to reach Nollin and Kerick in time to help them escape. Their quarters were reasonably accessible. They had shunned the towers in favor of proximity to the garden courtyard.

Nedwin worked his way along a narrow ledge, ducking to avoid a couple of windows, his toes hanging over the brink. He leaped, grabbed a jutting beam, and swung onto a new rooftop. If he fell, he would die. Same if he were caught. But ever since the dungeons, most danger had lost its edge.

He arrived at the garden courtyard, then jumped from the rooftop into a tall tree. Leaves and twigs slapped at him as his hands and feet found limbs to halt his fall. There were no continuous ledges around the courtyard walls, so Nedwin took three quick steps along a thick bough, sprang with his arms outstretched, and caught hold of a windowsill.

Pulling himself onto the narrow shelf, Nedwin found the window latched, but he forced it easily. The room was not occupied, although the bed had been slept in. He listened at the door, then peered into the hall.

In the distance Nedwin heard stern voices demanding surrender. Otherwise it was quiet, so he dashed down the hall to the suite where Nollin and Kerick were staying. The outer door had been forced. Inside he found their three guards dead alongside four other corpses.

“Nollin?” Nedwin called in a loud whisper. “Kerick?”

An inner door opened. Kerick looked out, a crossbow in hand. One side of his face was swelling and darkening. “Nedwin?”

Nedwin hurried to Kerick. “They came for me as well. We have to clear out.”

“You just missed the action,” Kerick said, letting him through the door. The room beyond was in disarray. Four more attackers lay dead on the floor. Nollin leaned against the wall. He was injured, his side slashed, one forearm badly broken.

“Can you move?” Nedwin asked. “We must not linger.”

“I don’t know,” Nollin replied, wincing as he stepped away from the wall.

“Try,” Nedwin said. “If you can’t keep up, we should take your seed. Come with me. I know this castle well.”

“Lead on,” Nollin said.

Kerick helped support Nollin. Nedwin found a loaded crossbow near one of the corpses in the outer room. Stepping back into the hall, he heard commotion off to the left, so he headed right.

After a few turns Nedwin led the seedmen into a conservatory full of musical instruments. “Some of the rooms and halls connect in surprising ways,” Nedwin explained. “The castle also hides many subtler passages. Galloran knew many of them. Nobody knows them all. I doubt anyone alive knows more of them than me.”

Moving aside a huge harp, Nedwin pulled back a heavy drapery to reveal a spiral stairway leading upward. “It would be generous to label this a secret passage, but none use it, and few know about it.”

They walked up the winding stair to a narrow hall. Nedwin passed two doors, then entered the third, revealing a storeroom crammed with art: sculptures, small fountains, urns, rolled tapestries, fine carpets, gaudy candelabras, enameled shields, a child-sized suit of plate armor, and endless painted portraits—some of them covered, more exposed—piled in tall stacks or otherwise wedged wherever they would fit.

As Nedwin started weaving his way across the room, he heard the seedmen behind him bumping into obstacles. He had always possessed excellent eyesight, but after the dungeons and the nervesong, his night vision was nothing short of incredible. He was only unable to see in the complete absence of light.

Pausing, Nedwin removed a strand of seaweed from his satchel, squeezing it to life. The length of kelp began to shed a soft blue radiance. This was his favorite variety of luminous seaweed, because it traveled well. Treated properly, it would still give off light a year after harvest. Whenever possible he tried to keep a few on hand.

On the far side of the crowded storeroom, behind a bell taller than most men, Nedwin opened a camouflaged panel in the wall, and they ducked into a dark, webby passageway. “We should be safe now,” Nedwin said. “At worst we might run into Copernum himself or one of his most trusted conspirators. The secrets of these private corridors are closely guarded.”

“You believe Copernum is behind this?” Nollin asked, his voice strained. The sleeve of the arm pressed to his side was darkly stained.

“I have no proof yet,” Nedwin said. “We will know for certain soon enough. Trensicourt is being claimed for the emperor. Many were involved, but I expect to find Copernum at the root of it.”

Walking along the corridor, Nedwin shielded the seaweed with his hands, letting a feeble glow seep between his fingers. As they rounded corners and descended cramped stairways, Nedwin paused at some of his favorite listening spots. The noise of skirmishes was failing. The guardsmen were not putting up much resistance. Many of them could have been involved.

Nollin mostly made his discomfort known with his labored breathing, along with the occasional sharp intake of breath as some jolt of agony surprised him.

“Where are we going?” Kerick whispered.

“I know five ways that will take us beyond the castle walls,” Nedwin said. “I believe I am the only man alive familiar with two of them. Tonight we will use my favorite. The corridor originates at the same level as the deepest reaches of the dungeon. There is a labyrinth of hidden tunnels down there. I have found the bones of some who lost their way. I will leave the two of you safe in a vault beneath a mausoleum, where the passage lets out. Then I will go to Nicholas.”

“He will be under attack as well,” Kerick said. “He made no secret of his allegiance to us and to Galloran.”

“But he will get away,” Nedwin said. “He was more ready for tonight than any of us. He will have others with him. We need allies.”

“You mean to keep fighting?” Kerick asked.

“I mean to win,” Nedwin replied.

\* \* \*

After checking a pair of other hideouts, Nedwin found Nicholas in his hideaway behind a cheap theater where actors performed mediocre comedies day and night. The theater had been there since Nedwin was a boy. His noble family had not approved of the establishment, but Nedwin had snuck out several times in lowborn attire to drop a copper drooma in the tin and sit through stale jokes, predictable melodrama, and bumbling pratfalls. The actors tended to overplay their roles, and sometimes flubbed their lines, but among the botched romances, foiled swindlers, and peasants disguised as royalty there were always laughs to be had and taunts to be shouted.

Tonight the theater, like the rest of Trensicourt, was silent. When the bulk of your military was away and giants roamed your streets, you extinguished your lights, shuttered your windows, locked your doors, and prayed to be ignored.

The bells had never cried out the emergency. The attack had started and finished in the deepest hours of night. Nedwin figured some people must have slept through the commotion and would awaken to find a new regime in place.

When Nedwin had given the secret knock at the grubby door behind the theater, Minna had answered, a sturdy young woman with shoulders like an oarsman. She was both niece and apprentice to Nicholas, and she seldom left his side. After Nedwin assured her that he was alone and had not been followed, Minna had checked up and down the alley and called to a lookout for approval before granting him admittance.

Dressed in wooly nightclothes, Nicholas lay in a hammock in the corner of a small room. Minna left Nedwin alone with her uncle.

"Forgive me if I do not rise," Nicholas said. "I seem to have misplaced my legs."

At home Nicholas moved around in an ingenious harness he had designed that dangled from suspended tracks. At court he was pushed about in a wheeled chair. "You must have left in great haste," Nedwin said.

"After Galloran reinstated me as a lord, I should have known that within a fortnight my home would be ransacked and I would be left impoverished."

"What do you know concerning the events of this night?" Nedwin asked.

"Fragments," Nicholas replied. "I know the giants attacked from within the city, at least forty of them. The brutes opened the gates for a modest host of imperial troops. The giants were not allowed inside the castle. Neither were imperial troops. Paranoid as ever, Copernum is carefully controlling access. I sent some men in search of information. Only Minna and my two most trusted bodyguards remain with me here. The rest of my household is at another hideout known only to me and mine."

"How many men do you know are loyal?" Nedwin asked.

"Besides you? There are sixteen in my household. Beyond them I have fewer than twenty reliable allies. I would trust none of the remaining nobility. Did any of your guards get away?"

"None," Nedwin said. "I would only have trusted those who died defending my room. I had no opportunity to aid them."

"Nollin?"

"The seedmen fought off the first wave of traitors sent to take them," Nedwin said. "I helped Nollin and Kerick flee through secret corridors. Nollin is grievously injured."

"I have a man who can attend him," Nicholas said.



“Any aid would be appreciated,” Nedwin said. “What can we do to retaliate?”

Nicholas laughed heartily. “If we’re lucky, we get out of Trensicourt until Galloran returns. If Galloran fails, we never come back.”

“I won’t abandon Trensicourt,” Nedwin said.

“Why not?” Nicholas asked. “Galloran did. His goal was to march on Felrook. He is accomplishing it. He took hasty and insufficient measures to protect the kingdom. He knew he was leaving a vacuum behind. He knew that opportunists like Copernum would rush in to fill the void. He did not wish it to happen, but it was a risk he gladly accepted in order to mount his offensive.”

“He left Trensicourt in my care,” Nedwin asserted. “In our care.”

“A seedman, a scout, and a cripple,” Nicholas chuckled. “Two of us knew little about the current politics within the city, and the third knew enough to keep his distance. I didn’t know how, or when, but tonight was inevitable. The takeover was perfectly planned, flawlessly executed. We did not stand a chance of opposing it. Galloran left with our fighters. Too many plotters held back too many of their men in a city with too few committed guardians.”

“I will not go quietly,” Nedwin said. “I am the regent. I am expected to protect Trensicourt. I mean to oppose these usurpers.”

“You did nothing wrong,” Nicholas said. “You committed no mistakes. You were made captain of a sinking ship, Nedwin. You need not go down with it.”

“I have my duty. It is too late to rejoin Galloran. I will not have him return to find an enemy on his throne.”

“This is no longer your duty,” Nicholas advised. “You are no longer regent. You have been ousted. Escape with me into exile. If Galloran returns, we can work with him to reclaim the city.”

“And if his armies need to retreat here after being bested at Felrook?”

“I have already dispatched an eagle to warn him,” Nicholas said. “He will know not to seek refuge here.”

“You are free to go,” Nedwin said. “You should bring Nollin—heal him or plant him. You should bring your bodyguards and your family. But leave me what fighting men you can and whatever trusted contacts remain.”

“I will lend what meager aid remains mine to share,” Nicholas sighed. “Do not proceed with your eyes closed. This is not a fight we can win. It would be a shame for you to throw your life away.”

“My life belongs to Galloran,” Nedwin said. “He left me here, and here I will stay.”

# FOUR KEEPS

Under the cover of night Rachel sat astride her mare at the front of a large force. Galloran waited beside her, eyes blindfolded, Io leading his stallion.

The fortress before her was called West Keep. Watch fires burned atop formidable walls packed with restless soldiers. The upcoming assault would not take the defenders by surprise.

Rachel had longed for this moment. Her outrage over Drake's death had not diminished—if anything it had increased, as her grief turned to anger and as that pent-up fury lacked an outlet. She knew that nothing would bring Drake back, but payback would start tonight, minutes from now.

She had a key role to play. She knew Galloran had alternate plans, in case she failed to fulfill her role, but she did not expect to fail. The part of her that might have been afraid seemed to have died along with Drake.

Conquering and occupying the keeps would provide them some protection from Maldor's approaching forces. Bad news had followed their march across the valley to Felrook. Some of the scouts who had turned south after the pass had not returned. Those who made it back had reported a host more than ten thousand strong massed at the southern end of the valley. It was a large enough army to give them serious trouble, although probably insufficient to defeat them. Except for leaving scouts behind to watch them, Galloran had ignored the force. He had decided the enemy troops were there solely to take and hold the pass in order to cut off their retreat.

Before they reached Felrook, news arrived that the pass had fallen. A handful of the defenders left behind had escaped up the mountainside. The rest had perished.

Not long afterward, an eagle from Nicholas had told of a coup at Trensicourt. Nedwin had been ousted as regent, and the city was now in the hands of their enemies. Rachel tried not to dwell on how terrible Nedwin probably felt about that mess. At least it sounded like he had survived.

No resistance had awaited their forces on the plains surrounding Felrook. As with the rest of the march, all had remained quiet. The town beside the ferry was abandoned. But the three keeps and the wall protecting the ferry were filled beyond capacity.

A drinling ran up to Galloran, saluted, and detailed the readiness of his soldiers. He was a burly man in mismatched armor, his face smudged with dirt, and he spoke English too rapidly to be easily understood. Galloran acknowledged his report and issued a few instructions.

The drinlings had united with the rest of Galloran's army on schedule. Rachel had been happy to find Io's father, Ul, among them, leading the wild clan. His hair was now completely white, but he still appeared hearty and strong. According to Ul, the drinlings had met with virtually no opposition during their long, quick march across the continent.

Rachel grimly regarded the solid fortress. It was not the only keep that would come under attack tonight. Once Galloran had organized his forces, Ferrin had schooled the leaders about the keeps. West Keep, North Keep, and East Keep were all of similar design. The big wall around each provided the main line of defense. The tall, thick walls had a single entrance with two sets of gates. The space between the gates passed below trapdoors and arrow loops where defenders could abuse attackers from cover. Rachel could hardly imagine how much courage it would take to charge such strong defenses, armed only with a sword, ax, or bow.

Each keep contained a large yard, along with extensive stables and barracks for horses and soldiers. The commanders lived in the keeps themselves—large, sturdy buildings, but not particularly defensible. If attackers could breach the wall, the rest would be relatively straightforward.

Naman had referred to the defenses around the ferry as the fourth keep. For planning purposes, the name had evolved to South Keep. Although it had no formal keep and contained fewer buildings than the other fortresses around Felrook, the walls of the South Keep were higher.

Ferrin had investigated the secret ways he knew into two of the keeps. Most of the passages had been sealed, or, in one instance, placed under heavy guard with an abundance of traps. But one way into East Keep was apparently unknown, or else those in command thought it impossible that their enemies knew the secret. The displacer was currently leading a sneak attack on East Keep using that obscure entrance. Rachel wondered if that assault had started yet. She hadn't heard any distant tumult of battle.

Moonlight waxed and waned with the movement of tattered clouds. When the pale light was brightest, Felrook loomed ominously above the lake, perched atop sheer cliffs rising vertically out of the water. The soaring towers and walls made Rachel feel like a mouse with aspirations to topple a skyscraper. She tried to ignore Felrook for the moment. They had to deal with the keeps before they could turn their attention to Maldor's greatest stronghold.

"The archers are in position," a seedman reported to Galloran. "The troops are ready."

"Proceed," the blindfolded leader directed.

The Amar Kabal had the finest bows in Lyrian, and the truest archers to aim them. The archers had assembled as far from the keep as their assignment allowed. The men on the wall made distant targets, but they were conveniently illuminated by the watch fires.

Three consecutive volleys of arrows soared through the night. Despite the great distance, a shocking amount of the projectiles found targets. Guards fell, screaming. The archers dropped back out of range before the guards could return fire.

Galloran signaled to Rachel. She idly wondered if he had been peeking at the events through her eyes and mind.

On the wall of the keep the main watch fires burned in elevated kettles. Rachel began to utter commands, shoving the kettles over, showering nearby soldiers with fiery coals and significantly reducing the amount of light available to the defenders. Even considering the distance involved, the effort felt simple, almost too easy to be called a warm-up, but she still enjoyed a pleasant rush of accomplishment. The tumbling kettles created quite a stir atop the walls as soldiers jostled one another.

The first wave of invaders charged forward, cumbersome shields held high. Rank after rank flowed forward around Rachel, Galloran, and their detachment of guards. The past few days had been spent preparing for this attack, including the construction of huge shields based on a design by Brin the Gamester. The unwieldy shields would be useless in hand-to-hand combat but would provide attackers with considerable protection from projectiles as they stormed the walls.

Rachel's next task would require the most finesse. The quantity of power involved was not great, but she had to execute it just right. As Galloran had made clear, this was her most essential assignment of the evening.

A crystal sphere the size of a soccer ball rested on the ground twenty yards away from her horse. Rachel commanded the gatecrasher into the air, then held it steady. The globe seemed light. She had never felt more focused. Mumbling a word, Rachel sent the sphere streaking toward the gate, driving it onward with her will. It passed well over the heads of the attacking troops, quickly leaving the fastest of them behind. Upon impact the crystal casing shattered, the mineral inside flared a brilliant white, and a tremendous explosion blasted the gate into kindling.

Rachel had been braced for a large detonation, but the penetrating thunder still made her jump. Snowflake flinched sideways, hoofs stomping, and Rachel murmured comforting words in Edomic. Even at this distance she felt a wave of heat after the blast. The front gate had disappeared; the stonework around it was cracked and blackened. A great curtain of smoke unfurled into the night sky.

A pleasant thrill accompanied the successful mandate, merging with the natural satisfaction of having demolished the gate. One more to go. With a second command Rachel sent another gatecrasher into the gaping blackness beyond where the first gate had stood. The sphere ruptured against the inner gate, the flash momentarily brightening the gap between the walls, and suddenly the way was clear.

Elation surged through Rachel. She had opened the way for Galloran's troops to invade the keep! If she stopped now, she would have more than proved her worth. Galloran had encouraged her to stop at this point if the effort seemed to be too much. But she had no intention of holding back.

Stones and arrows sleeted down from atop the wall as the attackers charged the gate. Trebuchets flung boulders, and ballistae hurled flurries of weighty iron darts. The heavier projectiles smashed through the upraised shields, opening trenches in the advancing mass of warriors. Some of the smaller projectiles slipped through gaps, dropping scattered invaders among the charging mob.

Driven by painful thoughts of Drake, Rachel dismounted and prepped her will for the heavy work. The potential commands boiled inside her. Maldor wanted to kill her friends? Not without consequences.

A storehouse in the town beside the ferry had contained an abundance of lantern oil. A wagon laden with some of that oil presently waited on the road leading to the gate of West Keep, casks and barrels strapped in place. The attackers raced toward the keep at either side of the road, but not directly on it.

Speaking a word, Rachel set the wagon ablaze, along with the cargo. It was a challenging command, but it almost felt easy. She hardly acknowledged the

resulting pleasure. Clenching her fists, she spoke words to push the wagon forward. Exerting her will and chanting additional words, she increased the speed of the wagon while keeping it stable. Stones and arrows bombarded the fiery cart. Casks ruptured, making the flames heave and spread. Rachel kept the portable inferno racing in the proper direction. When the wagon reached the gateless entrance perhaps fifteen yards ahead of the attackers, she gave one last mighty shove, throwing everything she had into the command. The wagon left the ground. Shedding a blizzard of sparks, burning boards snapped apart, and a sprawling wave of flame washed into the yard ahead of the attacking troops.

The effort left Rachel on her knees, gasping, a sharp pain drilling into her side. Her throat was raw, and she felt blood trickling from one nostril. At the same time, pleasure like she had never known coursed through her body, deliciously enlivening every nerve. Buoyed both physically and emotionally, she staggered to her feet, glorying in the triumphant rush of ecstasy. She had never exerted her will so hard.

“Well done,” Galloran said, his blindfold discarded. “You should rest.”

Rachel shook her head. She had launched her boulder into the sky, but Drake was still dead, and she was still standing. She suddenly wanted to throw her will against the wall of the keep, to slam against it with a tsunami of rage that would crush it to rubble. The desire felt compulsive, instinctive. Right now—hurting, exulting—such a command almost felt within her reach. But she knew the exertion would kill her, as surely as it would kill everybody on and behind the wall. Her own soldiers were already streaming through the entrance. Besides, they would need the wall to help defend their army in the coming days. With an effort she turned her attention to her next planned task.

Assistants had set aside twenty regular orantium spheres for her use, in case she still had energy left after the wagon. They would have to suffice. She sent four of them raining down above the gateway to get rid of the defenders harassing the attackers below. Then she propelled a sphere to each of the three visible ballistae. Finally, she sent the remainder sailing far over the wall to land deep in the yard beyond, well ahead of the brawling invaders. The explosions boomed like a string of giant firecrackers.

After hurling the last barrage, Rachel stumbled backward and sat down hard, her head throbbing, her ears ringing, her fingers and toes going numb. She felt dizzy, and her throat burned, the pain peaking each time she swallowed.

“No more,” Galloran ordered.

Rachel heard more orantium exploding beyond the walls. Many of the seedmen had orantium to use at their discretion. They were mostly planning on using the spheres to destroy manglers and to pulverize locked doors.

She fought back to her feet. Her assigned tasks were complete. She felt a little ragged, but she wanted to unleash one more blast. Something big. Gritting her teeth, Rachel focused on the tower on the right side of the wall, where defenders continued to send stones and arrows down on attackers. It would take quite a push to tear off the top of it. Feeling slightly lightheaded, she prepped her will.

Strong hands gripped her arms from behind, pulling her down to her knees. “No, Rachel,” Galloran said in her ear. “Let go. You’re spent. No more.” Holding her close, he followed the urgings with Edomic words of peace and relaxation.

Suddenly Rachel could hardly kneel, let alone stand. Her head spun. She slumped onto her side. Galloran gently released her. She couldn’t even raise her head. Why had she thought she could knock over the tower? She felt empty now, weak, overstretched. After pushing the wagon, the simple effort of hurling the orantium spheres had taken her beyond her limit. But the mighty tower had seemed vulnerable. Had she considered trying to shove over the entire wall? For a moment it had seemed almost fragile. Maybe she had failed to seize the opportunity when she’d had it. Or maybe the euphoric rush after pushing the wagon had made her grossly miscalculate her capacity. Rachel tried to rise but failed. Galloran steadied her. At least she remained conscious.

Drake was still dead. She tried to muster rage but only managed to feel empty and sick. Maldor had tried to kill Jason. He had killed Drake. He wanted to kill all her friends. She felt miserable, but anger was currently out of reach. She wanted to cry, but tears wouldn’t come.

From a great distance the rumbling of other orantium detonations could be heard. All the keeps were under attack. Brin had created launchers for the gatecrashers at the other sites. At East Keep, Ferrin was going to try to open the gates from within, although gatecrashers were on hand as the backup plan.

Galloran helped Rachel sit up. What was he doing? Didn’t he have a battle to oversee? He kept a supportive arm around her shoulders.

“We’ll win tonight,” Rachel said, her teeth chattering.

Galloran studied her with concern. “Are you all right?”

She nodded feebly. “Just tired. We’ll win.” Her throat felt really sore.

“I expect so,” Galloran said. “You were magnificent, but you pushed yourself too hard.”

“Maldor is sorry?”

Galloran brushed her damp hair out of her face. “We gave him something to think about. Thanks to you. And to the orantium. Otherwise, storming these keeps would have cost at least half our strength. A few good men can hold a strong wall against a horde. We should have paid dearly for these strongholds. They were heavily manned and well provisioned. Your contribution here at West Keep made our advantage even more overwhelming. Your Edomic spared hundreds of lives. Perhaps even thousands.”

“Maldor should have left them abandoned,” Rachel said. How many people had she killed tonight? The kettles, the orantium, the wagon . . .

“No,” Galloran said. “He’s too good of a strategist. He didn’t want to fight us at the pass, because we might have turned back. He didn’t want to engage us in the valley, because at present his forces would have been outnumbered by better warriors. But with these keeps he hoped to sap our strength before his armies arrive from the east. He would never have handed them to us. Had his men repelled us here, we could not have fled.”

Rachel turned to face Galloran. She felt a little less woozy. “His men won’t stop us tonight. Not if the other attacks are anything like this one.”

“Agreed. I do not think Maldor understood the extent of our orantium stores. He knew we had some spheres in our possession. I believe the quantity of orantium has surprised him, as have the gatecrashers, which is why these assaults needed to be simultaneous. Maldor believed these keeps would be a serious obstacle. His defenders were not ready for their gates to disappear at the outset of the attack.”

Rachel listened to the clamor of battle inside the fortress. “What now?”

“We wait for victory.”

\* \* \*

Not long before dawn Rachel ate breakfast inside the dining hall of West Keep. She felt halfway back to normal—her body remained weary, but her mind felt clear. Galloran ate with her. Ferrin sat beside her. Other leaders and friends joined them, including Naman, Ul, Io, Brin, Tark, Lodan, a drinling leader called Obb, and a seedman named Herral. Naman had commanded the attack on North Keep, Obb had supervised the conquest of South Keep, and Herral had overseen the taking of East Keep.



Before Rachel had reunited with Ferrin, she had already heard men singing his praises. Apparently, he had been quite a hero at East Keep, leading hundreds of soldiers past the walls undetected. They had taken the wall and opened the gates, attacking the defenders in the yard from above as the main force rushed through unhindered.

Rachel glanced sideways at Ferrin as she crumbled her biscuits and stirred them together with her eggs. "Tell me about your night. I hear you saved the day."

"I can share what I didn't do," Ferrin said. "I didn't singlehandedly blow open the gates, ram a wagonload of fire through the breach, then commence with a hailstorm of orantium. How's your head?"

"Feeling better," Rachel said. "It was good to stretch myself. Hopefully, I'll have more endurance next time. But I want details! I keep hearing how well things went at East Keep."

"We entered belowground. I disposed of some guards silently. We had practically filled the dungeon before we had to blow a door to proceed. The blast announced our presence, but our foes responded poorly. We killed some sentries and made it to the top of the wall before anybody really understood what was happening. Some orantium followed by brawny drinlings went a long way toward clearing the top of the wall. While seedfolk archers rained arrows into the yard, we reached the mechanisms and opened the gates."

"The displacer offers a humble account," Herral said. "He slew at least twenty foes, including three displacers, and lost his head leading the charge along the wall."

"I got it back," Ferrin clarified.

"He personally opened the gates," Herral went on. "Then he led a team into the keep proper by another secret way. Without using gatecrashers, we lost fewer than a hundred souls taking East Keep, and we slew better than a thousand."

"The offensive could not have gone more smoothly," Naman announced. "Attacking fortifications like these keeps, we should have lost at least five soldiers for every enemy slain. Instead, the balance of casualties was well in our favor. We lost fewer than fifteen hundred fighters in total, including fewer than a hundred at East Keep and fewer than two hundred at West Keep, where we enjoyed the greatest advantages."

"It was an inspiring victory," Galloran agreed, his eyes closed. "It will also be our only victory unless we take Felrook soon. The keeps were meant to hinder

us, but the fatal trap remains. We will be outnumbered more than twenty to one when Maldor's armies return from the east."

Rachel plucked little chunks from her roll, pinching it apart instead of eating it. Last night had been nightmarish, and that had been a victory! What would defeat look like? She wished they had more time to enjoy their success.

"I'll start walling off the gateless entrances this morning," Brin said. "We'll make our captured fortresses as secure as possible. And I'll get to work on how we might crack Felrook."

"We must all bend our thoughts toward raiding Felrook," Galloran said. "We have no time to starve them out. We cannot flee. We cannot resist the coming tide of enemies. We must take Felrook before they arrive or else perish."

Rachel had already been thinking long and hard about how they might penetrate Felrook. She had come up with no brilliant schemes. She would put more thought into it as Galloran asked, but she hoped they wouldn't be relying on her to supply the answer.

"Felrook has secret passages," Ferrin said, "but none that lead in or out. I know of no fortress more secure—no gate less available, no walls less reachable, no defenses more comprehensive. With only one way up the cliffs, we cannot throw numbers at the problem. There is no access for siege towers or ladders. Expert climbers would be hard-pressed to reach the base of the walls under ideal conditions. The best trebuchet ever designed could not fling a stone halfway up the cliffs."

Ul leaned over and spoke to Obb in Ji, the staccato drinling language.

"We have orantium," Obb said.

"Which could create opportunities," Ferrin allowed. "It will be hard to deliver explosives. Even if we destroy the gates, the path up the cliff is rigged to collapse. How do wingless men attack a fortified island in the sky?"

"The task appears impossible," Galloran said. "It will require all our strength and ingenuity. But there has to be a way to succeed. We know this by prophecy. We must invent a way to accomplish our aim. Not just our lives, but the lives of every man, woman, and child in Lyrian depend on it. Obsess about this problem. Encourage your best men to wrestle with it. And the least of your men. Stay open to strategies never attempted before."

Ferrin leaned close to Rachel so he could whisper. "Translation? Pray that Lord Jason succeeds in his quest. Try not to lose your sanity in the meanwhile."

# THE FUMING WASTE

Shortly after dawn, from the shoulder of a craggy hill streaked orange and white, Jason viewed his first panoramic vista of the Fuming Waste. Bands of red, orange, yellow, pink, and white gave striking color to the limestone landscape. Stunted vegetation subsisted in sparse patches—contorted trees, scraggly shrubs, and prickly cacti. Two geysers were erupting, one not far below, the other more distant. Both spewed sparkling towers of scalding water and steam into the air. Within a minute or two the nearer fountain shrank to a bubbling froth and then stopped. The distant geyser kept gushing for a good while. A third geyser started up in the middle distance, just before the far one began to decline.

“It’s lovely,” Corinne said from astride her gelding. “Look at the new one!”

As the soaring eruption continued to stretch higher, refracted sunlight laced the spray with prismatic ripples of color. Behind the radiant display, the farther geyser continued to diminish.

“Three geysers in a row?” Jason said. “I hope geysers are lucky.”

Jasher grunted. “If so, we have come to the luckiest place in Lyrian.”

“I cannot vouch for their value as omens,” Farfalee said, “but the waters of the Fuming Waste are certainly unruly. We’re only at the outskirts. As we draw nearer to the mountains we will find hot springs, painted rivers, sludge pits, cauldrons, sinkholes, steam vents, mineral terraces, mud volcanoes, and geyser cones. None of our maps will be perfect, for the geography here evolves much more rapidly than anywhere else in Lyrian. We will need to proceed with care. There are volatile areas where the ground becomes wafer thin above boiling lakes or where scant layers of sand disguise wells of searing mud.”

“Sounds perfect for a picnic,” Jason quipped. “Who brought the sandwiches?”

“I have ridden this hazardous region before,” Jasher said, “though I never came so near to the heart of the Fuming Waste as this journey demands. Certain indicators can help protect us. Watch for steaming ground. Watch for webs of cracks. Feel for warm pockets. Listen for gurgling. Listen for the earth below popping or splitting. We’ll ride single file.” He pointed into the distance. “The

Great Yellow Cone is our first landmark. From there we must proceed across the Polished Plain to the Stepping-Stones, past the Giant's Bathhouse, and finally into the Scalding Caverns."

"And Rachel has the good camera," Jason sighed. "Anything after the Scalding Caverns? Maybe the Flaming Hot Ocean of Misery?"

"The Narrow Way," Farfalee said. "And finally our destination."

Jason could see the first landmark poking above a distant ridgeline. The conical mount was shaped just like a volcano that a child would draw, its coloring the same yellow and white as a lemon meringue pie.

During the long ride north they had not been spied by their adversaries, though as he scouted, Jasher had occasionally glimpsed enemy riders from a distance. The seedman had led their group on a lengthy ride inland before veering northward. The strategy had added at least a day to the trek, but it made the task very difficult for any soldiers who sailed north in order to cut them off or pick up their trail.

Two of Farfalee's messenger eagles had returned to her after she had set them loose the night they had abandoned the *Valiant*. She did not dare let them fly for fear of revealing their location. Instead, she kept them tethered to Aram's saddle, feeding the large birds from the group's rations.

Jason flicked his reins and followed Jasher down the rugged hillside. The seedman weaved along the slope, inventing the trail as he went. Aram pointed out a black scorpion the size of a lobster. Jasher warned that the smaller, orange scorpions had a deadlier sting. Jason didn't crave an encounter with either variety.

They saw no new geysers for more than an hour, but by sunset Jason had counted eleven. They made camp in a cove of red rock. In addition to their regular rations, everyone but Jasher and Farfalee sampled part of the five-foot pit snake Del had killed. The cooked meat was chewy and almost sweet.

The next day the Great Yellow Cone grew gradually nearer. Jason had a hard time gauging its size. It was certainly nothing to rival the mountains on the horizon, but it was a good deal taller than the surrounding mesas, drawing the eye more than any other feature.

As the day wore on, they more frequently passed steaming vents. Some were jagged cracks no wider than a pencil, others yawning holes large enough to swallow a motor home. They also came across bubbling pools of muck—some red, some black, some white, most a silvery gray. The mud varied in thickness

from viscous sludge to watery syrup. Some pools coughed up an occasional slow bubble; others simmered vigorously. Most of them reeked of sulfur.

Throughout the ride Jason missed Drake. He missed his teasing comments, his reliable advice, and even his cynical predictions. He missed the steady competence of his presence. They were less safe without him. More than once Jason had caught himself wondering when Drake would return from scouting, only to remember that his friend would never be back. From time to time he rode with his head bowed to hide the tears.

They stopped for the night near a black pool with a churning disturbance near the center. After making camp, Jason went to stare at the pool while twilight faded. The constant disruption heaved dark fluid eight feet into the air, like a small, permanent geyser. The central churning kept the rest of the surface rippling vigorously. Jasher called the murky pool a cauldron, which Jason considered an apt description.

As more stars emerged in the darkening sky, Corinne joined Jason beside the pool. For a long moment she watched with him in silence. Eventually he noticed that her attention had shifted from the pool to him. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm good," Jason said, uncertain how else to respond.

"You've seemed extra quiet lately."

"Have you heard? We're being hunted."

"I'm serious."

Jason turned his attention back to the pool. "I don't know. It's been harder since we lost Drake. And then we lost so many people at Gulba. I guess it's getting to me."

"I'm glad to hear that," Corinne said.

Jason looked at her sharply. "You're heartless."

"No," she apologized. "I mean, I'm glad because I feel the same way. I feel . . . drained, sad . . . you know."

"I know. It's rough. I guess we try to look on the bright side. We're getting close. Maybe some of us will actually make it."

"All the rest of us," she said.

"I hope so." He glanced her way. "You were amazing against that lurker. I couldn't believe it."

"Neither could I," Corinne said. "I was so scared. But I could feel its mind, and I knew I had a chance. I also knew it would lead soldiers to us. It might have made escape impossible. It had no weapon. I felt like I had to try."

“I honestly thought you were dead,” Jason said. “That might have been it for me.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Corinne scolded. “Of all of us, you need to hold true to the end.”

Jason looked down at his hands. Why him? Why did it matter so much for him to find Darian’s home? He wasn’t the best fighter. If anything, he was the worst. But the oracle had named him first. As a result, Drake had died to save him. Guilt twisted deep inside.

Corinne put a hand on his. Her hand was not soft. She had calluses from practicing with her sword. He squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

Maybe Darian was alive. Maybe Darian would only share secrets with Beyonders. Maybe there would be a riddle that only Jason could answer. Maybe only his fingerprint could open the secret vault.

“We’ll make it,” Jason said. He tried to mean it. He mostly did. It seemed like she needed him to say it. “We’ll find the message from Darian.”

“I believe that,” Corinne said. “Don’t lose hope.”

“I won’t.” She was sitting close.

Corinne patted his hand and rose. “You shouldn’t sit here all night.”

“Just a little longer.”

She walked away. Jason stared at the churning sludge, feeling alone. Drake had died specifically for him. A big part of Jason wished that he hadn’t. But it couldn’t be undone. So now the responsibility was on his shoulders to make that mean something.

\* \* \*

The next morning, not long after they began riding, the Great Yellow Cone erupted. Water and steam jetted upward for the better part of two hours, infinite droplets glittering in the morning light. By the end the entire conical mount glistened wetly.

Soon after the Great Yellow Cone went dry, Nia spotted the third messenger eagle returning. Jasher and Aram instantly became alert. As the eagle circled down to Farfalee, Jasher pointed at a distant figure atop a pink ridge, little more than a speck to the naked eye.

Jason felt dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. That tiny figure in the distance could spell big trouble. Aram had worried from the start that their enemies might find a way to track them using the eagles. Jason looked to the small half giant.

Aram swiveled his spyglass to where Jasher was pointing. "He has a telescope of his own," Aram snapped. "He's waving. He's turning his horse."

"They must have caught the eagle," Jasher guessed. "They came north and used it to track us."

"How could they have caught it?" Farfalee asked. The eagle perched on her arm, eating from her hand. "Eina would not have gone to them willingly. Until I send it with a message, while I remain alive Eina would only come to me."

Jason thought she sounded a little defensive. Farfalee had to feel terrible that one of her eagles had given them away. After all, Aram had warned her.

"It would have taken some craft," Jasher said. "Does it matter how they managed it? The damage is done. We need to pick up the pace."

By sunset they were in the shadow of the Great Yellow Cone. Aram had grown, which made Jason feel a bit safer. Spyglass in hand, Jasher scrambled up the side of the geyser cone. The climb was hundreds of feet. Much of the light had faded before he reached the top.

"A big group, still riding hard," Jasher reported upon his return. "Could be as many as thirty riders."

"How far back?" Jason asked.

Jasher inhaled through his teeth. "If we hold still and they ride through the night, they might have us."

"Then we had best not keep still," Farfalee said.

"We'll need to take care," Jasher said. "The Polished Plain lies ahead of us. The ground is thin there. I have always heard that horses are too heavy to cross it, and the information on our most comprehensive map agrees."

"Should we think about finding a place to make a stand?" Jason asked. "Try to catch them off guard? Hit them with a rockslide or something?"

"Thirty is too many," Aram said. "We only have two orantium spheres. We should first try to outrun them."

"How far to the plain?" Farfalee asked.

"We could be there before sunrise," Jasher replied.

"The horses are tired," Nia said.

"We won't ride them hard," Jasher replied. "We don't want to attempt the Polished Plain in the dark."

After their evening meal they continued riding. There were enough clouds to mute the moon most of the time, forcing Jasher to light a length of seaweed. The glow let them see enough to avoid falling down a hole, but it would also give their pursuers an easy target to follow.

The worry of enemies behind them kept Jason from feeling too tired. He listened to the strange exhalations of the alien landscape—the burbling of sludge pools, the sighs of steam vents, and the gusty splashing of geysers.

After they paused for a quick nap and some food, sunrise found them at the edge of a spectacular plain that stretched ahead for miles. Less than an inch of water flowed across the flat, stony expanse, giving the surface a glossy shine. Every color was represented in streaks and swirls, with an emphasis on white, yellow, orange, red, and turquoise. Bubbling springs abounded, the water spreading more than flowing. Steam leaked up from everywhere. Crouching at the edge of the damp plain and extending his hand, Jason found the water lukewarm.

“We lack a good vantage anywhere close,” Jasher said. “It is hard to judge how far back our pursuers remain. If they rode hard, they will have gained on us. Afoot it could cost us all day to cross the plain. The question becomes whether we proceed with or without our mounts.”

Jason looked back. He couldn’t see any sign of enemy riders. But they might lope into view at any second.

“Can we go around?” Del asked.

Jasher showed the drinkling the map. “The plain is long, and it curves around our destination. Going around is not feasible. It might not even be possible.” Jasher folded the map, staring forward. “The entire plain is essentially a frail crust over superheated water. Even without the weight of our mounts we could crash through at any moment. It will be like treading on weak ice.”

“It’s a good time to be small,” Aram said. “What if we lead the horses?”

“It’s a risk,” Jasher said. “Cracks can spread. If a horse breaks though, it could start an event that could take all of us with it.”

“Then we walk,” Farfalee said.

“Our enemies will have the same choice,” Jasher cautioned. “If they stay mounted, and the ground holds, they will catch us.”

“Do you think it will hold for horses?” Farfalee asked.

“No,” Jasher said. “I’m worried whether it will hold for us. If we walk and they ride, I believe theirs will be the greater risk.”

“Then we walk,” she repeated. “We had best make ready.”

Working quickly, they took as much of their gear and provisions as they could reasonably carry. Jason checked his saddlebags for any stuff he might have missed. Corinne tried to communicate with the horses to run off and thrive in



the wild but didn't seem optimistic about her success. Del volunteered to lug Aram's armor. Nia took his enormous sword.

"It's heavy," Aram warned her.

"I'll be fine," Nia said. "If anything, the exertion will just make me stronger."

"Tread lightly," Jasher advised. "If the ground starts to give, fall flat. We'll walk single file, not too close together. I'll take the lead."

"I'll bring up the rear," Del offered.

Walking behind Farfalee and ahead of Corinne, Jason ventured out onto the Polished Plain. Water splashed gently with each step. Jason noticed that the temperature of the thin layer of water varied from tepid to boiling. He felt tense, aware that he might break through into scalding water at any second. From time to time he sensed the ground creaking beneath him.

Jasher did not lead them in a straight line. He explained that he was trying to guess the safest ground, based on the presence of springs, venting steam, and the water temperature. He kept well away from the smoldering pools, where the ground had already given way. They advanced in silence, listening for evidence of danger. Several times Jasher edged back carefully as the ground crackled underfoot.

Jasher tried to keep them in warm water rather than hot, but it was not always possible. Heat radiated from the water and the ground, leaving Jason with lots of empathy for steamed vegetables. A greasy sheen of sweat and vapor clung to him all morning.

By noon the pursuing riders came into view at the edge of the plain behind them. The intervening steam made the tiny forms shimmer. Thankfully, Jasher had overestimated their numbers. Unfortunately, they were still close to two dozen.

After milling about at the edge of the plain for several minutes, the riders opted to remain mounted and came cantering toward them. Looking back at the oncoming riders made their progress since dawn feel pathetic.

Jason resisted the urge to run. At this point it wouldn't do any good. He couldn't outrace a horse.

"We have no cover," Aram pointed out. "If they reach us, they'll ride us down."

"Fan out," Jasher said. "Jason, keep your orantium handy. Try to throw it in front of a tight group of riders. Maybe we can help the ground to give. Farfalee, Nia, ready your bows."

They spread out, facing their enemies. Jasher held his torivorian sword in one hand and his orantium globe in the other. Jason did likewise. The moisture in the air made the globe feel slippery.

The horses were charging hard. There were so many! At least the orantium gave Jason some hope of defending himself and his friends. He realized that he would have to throw his globe as far as he could or else he would risk sending his entire group into the boiling lake. He would have to time it just right to take out the maximum number of riders.

Before long the pursuers had come half the distance from the edge of the plain. Water sprayed up as hoofs drummed across the steaming ground. The high sun made small shadows beneath them.

Jason's mouth was dry. How was he supposed to stand against a bunch of charging horsemen? Farfalee might drop a few riders with her bow. He supposed he would have to try to dodge and slash with his sword as best he could. Hoofs and weaponry would be coming at him all at once. How would he avoid so many threats? Would any of them manage to stand against such a brutal onslaught? This could be the end. Behind the riders, beyond the plain, Jason saw a geyser erupting.

And then suddenly three of the lead riders disappeared, dropping out of view without warning, flaky fragments of stone flipping up as water splashed high. Other riders sought to slow or swerve, but within seconds a huge section of ground had collapsed, leaving fewer than ten riders on the surface of the plain.

For a long moment the broken area was a steamy stew of horse heads and flailing arms, but the tumult grew still before long. Dismounting, the remaining pursuers abandoned their horses and proceeded on foot, giving the newly created pool a wide berth.

Jason glanced over at Corinne. She looked relieved and a little horrified. Her eyes met his.

"That got my heart rate up," Jason confessed.

She sheathed her sword. "I kept thinking, 'Of course they won't fall; of course this will be the one time twenty horses gallop across this fragile plain without making a single crack.'"

Aram watched through the spyglass, grinning like a child at the circus. "Eight remain."

"I can finish eight with my bow once they come within range," Farfalee said. "They lack cover, and I have plenty of arrows. The rest of you go on ahead."

"You shouldn't stay back alone," Jasher said. "What if you lose your seed?"

“I’ll stay with her,” Nia offered. “I have a bow as well.”

Jasher nodded. “Wait until they are well within range or they will fall back out of reach. We’ll await you at the far side of the plain. Our departure should lure them forward faster.”

After wiping the lens of the spyglass on his sleeve, Aram took another look. “None are heavily armored. For Farfalee, filling them with arrows will be like a holiday exhibition.”

“I might hit one too,” Nia pointed out.

“Anything is possible,” Aram replied.

Nia swatted him, brandishing his sword. “Don’t forget who totes this while the sun is out!”

“I meant no insult,” Aram said. “I’ve just never seen anyone shoot like Farfalee.”

Jasher led all of them but Farfalee and Nia single file. Jason kept peering over his shoulder, watching for the soldiers to come within range. They all stopped when Farfalee and Nia started shooting. The exhibition did not take long.

Farfalee and Nia caught up to the others by late afternoon.

“I hit two,” Nia reported. “I also missed twice, but one of my hits was fatal.”

“I stand corrected about your marksmanship,” Aram said. Raising his voice, he called ahead to Jasher. “Any chance of picking up the pace? This Polished Plain is one of the few places where little Aram has a definite advantage.”

“We’ll make it by sundown,” Jasher promised.

They crept onward. The lack of sleep from the night before was catching up with Jason. The pace was not quick, but it was relentless, and the constant danger of the ground giving way kept him tense. They ate while walking. At one point Jasher’s foot broke the surface, but he managed to skip backward before the crust shattered beneath him. In the end Jasher barely managed to keep his promise. Aram grew large perhaps ten minutes after leaving the Polished Plain behind.

The next day they reached landmarks more quickly. They sighted the Stepping-Stones—seven staggered columns of rock that increased in height—early in the day, and then left them behind by the afternoon.

The Giant’s Bathhouse was a naturally terraced mesa with overflowing pools at various levels. The spilling water left behind colorful mineral deposits—elaborate draperies that gave the mesa the appearance of a huge cake dripping with frosting. Rolling clouds of steam billowed from a gaping cave at the base of the fanciful formation.

They halted for the night not far beyond the Giant's Bathhouse. Jasher informed them that in the morning it would only take a few hours to reach the Scalding Caverns. Once through the caverns they would follow the Narrow Way to the last abode of Darian the Seer.

"Do you think this will really be the right place?" Jason asked Corinne as they prepared to bed down. "Do you think we'll find Darian?"

"I expect so," she replied. "I can't imagine there was other information at the library that the oracle would have wanted us to follow. Having Farfalee along to read that Petruscan scroll had to be by design."

"I hope so," Jason said. "If we're wrong, I guess there isn't much we can do about it. The instructions make it sound like I should enter alone."

"Alone and unarmed," Jasher clarified. "The prophecy named you as the person who needed to collect the information from Darian. The rest of us are here to get you to your destination."

Jason nodded, trying not to display the heaviness he felt inside.

"We might be willing to guard the door while you're in there," Nia said.

"Think he'll speak English?" Jason wondered.

"He lived before English became prevalent," Farfalee said. "But if he's still around, who knows? If the prophecy sent you here, there must be some way for the two of you to communicate."

"Think we'll make it there tomorrow?" Jason asked.

"Depends on how long this Narrow Way will be," Farfalee said. "It is on none of the maps, and the instructions were unclear about the distance. The way should end at a waterfall. The entrance is under and behind the cascade."

The conversation died. Jason nestled into his blanket, and he could feel himself slipping toward sleep when Jasher sat up abruptly. Snapping back to full consciousness, Jason listened intently. After a moment he heard footfalls. It sounded like a single runner.

Farfalee and Nia nocked arrows. Jason grabbed his sword. Jasher had not risked a fire, but the moon was bright tonight.

The runner kept coming, feet pounding steadily. The oncoming stranger did not seem to be making any efforts at stealth. A few moments later Heg jogged into view.

"Heg?" Nia asked in disbelief.

The drinling stopped and waved. "You weren't easy to follow." He was only slightly out of breath.

“We were worried all of you had died,” Jasher said. “The scenario looked bleak.”

“Most of us did,” Heg said. “I escaped into the water, swam to safety. I don’t think anyone else made it. Certainly not those who stayed on dry land.”

“How’d you find us?” Jason asked, amazed.

“I came north,” Heg said. “I knew the general direction, some of the main landmarks. My best clues came from the horsemen on your trail. I followed them. Looked like their mission ended back on that watery plain. Unless I’m mistaken, some of them got to check how polished the plain appears from the underside. I knew I was getting close, because the soldiers with arrows in them were recently slain. This evening I followed your tracks from the edge of the plain.”

“Well met,” Del said, gripping forearms with his leader.

“I’m relieved to find you in such good health,” Heg said. “It seemed the entire population of the Inland Sea had been mobilized to hunt you.”

“We stayed well away from the coast,” Jasher said. “Those horsemen back there were our first real problem.”

“A wise strategy,” Heg approved. “The coasts are definitely swarming. What became of the others with you?”

“We lost Zoo, Thag, and Fet while fleeing Gulba,” Farfalee said. “Zoo fell to a torivor. Thag and Fet were claimed by Groddic.”

“Groddic?” Heg exclaimed. “The chief of the conscriptors?”

“He paid with his life,” Nia said.

“And what of the torivor?” Heg wondered. “The one that kept helping them find us?”

“Corinne killed it,” Jason said.

“It had no swords,” she added humbly. “I could feel its mind, anticipate its movements.”

“Impressive,” Heg said. He clapped his hands together. “I am relieved to have found you. I did not mean to interrupt your slumber. I doubt that I arrived in time to be of much service against our enemies. Over the past few days I have seen no evidence of further pursuit. For now we appear to have passed beyond their reach. But I will be more than curious to witness how this ends.”

“We’re glad to have you with us,” Farfalee said. “Come share some of our food.”

Jason fell asleep before Heg finished his meal.

# AMBUSH

Nedwin sat on a rooftop watching the sunrise, the morning air cool against his skin. Ever since the coup, regardless of the hour, the city had been markedly quieter. Nobody wanted to be noticed.

Including him.

Nedwin was positioned so that no onlookers could see him from the street below, nor from any of the neighboring rooftops, unless they were directly to his east. The sun peeked over the horizon, throwing long shadows among the forest of spires, domes, belfries, cupolas, gables, turrets, and chimneys.

A satchel containing five orantium globes sat at his side. A separate stash of twelve was hidden inside the castle. Most of the remaining globes had been delivered by a seedman messenger not long after Galloran was crowned. The king of Trensicourt had left behind all the orantium he could spare. Nedwin had detonated none so far.

Nicholas had gone. The legless lord had several hideaways prepared in the country outside the city. He had left Nedwin with some men, some contacts, a few letters of introduction, and the keys to some secret hideouts and storerooms.

Nollin had gone. Even after treatment it was not certain whether the seedman would survive. The wound to his side had been deep. He would remain with Nicholas until he either died or healed.

Kerick had remained. Nedwin now had a network of almost thirty men who he trusted. Most of them would be involved with the operation today in one capacity or another.

As Nedwin had expected, Copernum had orchestrated the insurrection. He had established himself as regent and claimed Trensicourt on behalf of the emperor. He had also announced the annihilation of Galloran and his army. Nedwin sensed that many doubted the lie, but nobody challenged the new regent vocally. Copernum had welcomed imperial soldiers into the city to help keep the peace during the transitional period. And he had stayed safely behind the castle walls.

The people of Trensicourt were unhappy, some were even angry, but the most capable of them had marched off to war. Intimidating patrols of soldiers and giants prowled the streets. The few open dissenters vanished promptly. Despite the atmosphere of oppression and uncertainty, people were returning to their daily business, conducting most of it indoors.

The majority of the soldiers and all the giants were barred access to the castle. Copernum was being very careful about who entered. Dolan, the grand duke, and certain predictable nobles were among the inner circle granted admittance, along with their personal guards and retainers.

Keeping the giants outside the castle had created an opportunity. Thanks to Aram and Jason, Nedwin knew what happened to giants once the sun came up, as it was doing now: They shrank.

Finding the lair where the giants hid during the day had been no small undertaking. In the days since the coup, most of his effort had focused on that one mystery. In the end the key had been following the food wagons.

He currently sat on the roof of a warehouse used to supply rations for the occupying force within the city. He and others had followed a number of giants during their nightly patrols. Not long before sunrise, the giants had all returned to the five main garrisons around the city.

At first Nedwin had guessed that the giants remained hidden at the various garrisons during the day, but he kept coming up against dead ends as he tried to discover where, specifically, they were housed. Then he had considered the morning food deliveries. The wagons went into the garrisons, remained unseen while food was unloaded, and then came out not long after dawn. All the wagons returned directly to a central warehouse. And that was where the tiny giants were unloaded. Nedwin had witnessed the process with his own eyes. The giants spent the day under one roof, sleeping and feasting, then returned to the garrisons with another food delivery before sunset.

Even in their small form, the giants ate a lot. It made sense to hide them where food was abundant and to limit the number of people who knew their secret by keeping the giants grouped at a central location. The logistics of maintaining five different covert holding areas at five separate garrisons would have been more complicated.

Of course, now that the secret was known, keeping the giants in a single location also made it easier to eliminate them. Or so Nedwin hoped.

He felt that the giants currently posed the single greatest threat to Trensicourt. There were more than eighty of the brutes, higher than the early

estimates. That many giants backing the imperial guards every night was enough to make even the bravest revolutionary consider keeping his head down.

The imperial desire for secrecy increased the chance for success. There were not many human guards at the warehouse, and they kept out of sight. Most of them also helped drive the wagons. From what Nedwin could tell, no more than ten guards shared the secret, all of them senior conscriptors. The warehouse had only two entrances—a wide set of loading doors for the wagons, and a smaller door that led out the back. The guards protected the doors from the inside, probably to avoid drawing attention to the building.

The large warehouse had high, dirty windows. Reaching them had proven impractical—dangling upside down from the eaves would have left him much too exposed. So for reconnaissance purposes Nedwin had quietly cut holes in the roof.

As the sun elevated above the horizon, Nedwin reflected that this would be the first major blow against the usurpers who had staged the coup. To lose their giants would prove that their occupation was not as secure as it seemed. It would give others who wanted the empire out of Trensicourt reason to hope and reason to take action.

Losing eighty giants would also be a strong blow against Maldor. Of all the races of Zokar, giants were by far the rarest. They had aided Maldor in the past, giving him an undeniable advantage wherever they went. Nedwin felt eager to contribute to their extinction.

Although this would be his first military strike, Nedwin had already performed some minor mischief. Three days ago, toward the end of his search for the giants, Nedwin had accessed a garrison kitchen. For a moment he had been alone with three simmering kettles of stew. He carried multiple types of poison in the vials around his neck. He could have probably killed a fifth of the occupying soldiers.

But poison was a cowardly weapon, and the soldiers were tools, not masterminds. With access to a private bowl being delivered to Copernum, Nedwin would not have hesitated to make it lethal. A different set of rules applied to targeting a specific enemy. Poisoning a large group of soldiers was not only dishonorable, but it could lead to serious repercussions for the people of Trensicourt. Such unfair tactics would lead to unfair retaliation.

So instead Nedwin had seasoned the soup with a substance that would leave all who ingested it violently ill for at least a week. The feverish retching would be blamed on bad meat rather than shameful tactics. Although the enduring



consequences would be minimal, over the short term the miserable symptoms would harm morale and reduce the number of guardsmen on patrol.

How would Copernum and his fellow conspirators respond to the death of the giants? They certainly would not want it known that their massive warriors had been wiped out in a single ambush. They would probably pretend to have sent them away. Nedwin suspected that only the most gullible soldiers and citizens would believe it.

Finally, Nedwin heard the first wagon clatter into the warehouse. He stole a couple of quick peeks as the second and third wagons rolled inside. It was a few minutes until the fourth arrived, and another short wait for the fifth and final shipment of miniature giants.

After the loading doors were closed and locked, Nedwin kept waiting. There was no need to rush the attack. He wanted them to have time to feel secure and relaxed. Let them eat. Let them unwind. Most of the giants would bed down, and the guards would settle in for another dull, routine day. Except for spoiled meat in the stew a few days ago, the city had been quiet ever since the night Copernum seized power. There was no reason for anyone to expect that pattern to break today, especially in this covert dormitory.

The sun climbed higher, reeling in the long shadows. Nedwin stretched. Too much inaction had left him feeling a little knotted. He rolled his neck, twisted his waist, extended his arms, and flexed his fingers.

He crept into position. There was no reason to hurry. Total silence was the goal, and he achieved it.

Late last night, while the giants were on patrol and the warehouse was still, Nedwin had constructed a hatch in the roof. Then he had erected a little tent over it. The tent would prevent sunlight from spilling through when the hatch opened. Even if he were spotted immediately, the plan should still work. But it would work better if he caught them completely unaware.

Easing the hatch open, Nedwin climbed down into the rafters. He knew that he might be seen at any moment. Movement tended to draw the eye, and there were many bodies below him. Most of them were slumbering dwarfs, but some were on their backs. All it took was one set of eyes.

He balanced up high in a shadowed corner crisscrossed with struts and beams. He watched those below him as best he could, motionless until he felt sure no gazes were directed his way. Inch by inch he reached the roost he wanted without anyone raising an alarm.

Below him four sentries clustered near the big doors by the wagons. Another pair of guards manned the smaller back door. Three-quarters of the dwarfs were asleep or at least trying. The others mostly conversed. A red-faced pair arm-wrestled across a square table. One dwarf whittled. Another munched on an apple. One read.

Nedwin held an orantium globe in each hand. The first throw was the trickiest. He wanted the globe to disable all four guards while damaging the loading doors enough for attackers to open them. It was a long throw. The pair by the back door was nearer.

After counting down in his head, Nedwin flung a globe toward the loading doors, pivoted, and hurled the other at the guards by the back door. Because the second globe traveled farther, they both exploded simultaneously. The blasts echoed loudly in the large, enclosed space. Nedwin noticed the undersized giants jerking and jumping with surprise.

The next two globes were for the little guys. They had kindly bedded down close to one another, so two spheres would go a long way toward ridding Trensicourt of giants. He threw the globes, watching as they curved downward. He covered his ears against the resounding explosions.

Obscured by smoke, Kerick led a group of fighting men through the back door. Gorson, the best man Nicholas had left behind, led more fighters through the damaged loading doors.

The dwarfs never stood a chance. They were not dressed for battle. Most had no weapons handy. Some tried to fight. Others scattered, trying to hide. Most appeared frightened and confused.

Nedwin held the fifth orantium sphere ready but had no occasion to use it. The uneven battle ended swiftly. Two of his allies had been injured, one killed. Kerick had been the most efficient, slaying at least ten foes. Nedwin wondered if any one man had ever cut down so many giants over such a brief period.

On their way out, the men splashed lantern oil around the room and started fires. That was the signal for Nedwin to return to the roof. His men would split up and disappear along prearranged routes. A few would stay near enough to watch for any emerging stragglers.

Nedwin would slip away quietly as well, using the rooftops as his roads. He needed to get away clean. He had other tasks to perform.

# DECISION

**B**eneath a bright sun Rachel walked along the top of the East Keep's wall, gazing out at Felrook, the ultimate immovable object, firmly anchored atop the highest prominence in the valley. Even if the imposing castle had not enjoyed such an elevated foundation, its soaring walls and lofty towers would have dwarfed the lesser fortresses around Lake Fellion.

So far Maldor's central stronghold had proven as unassailable as the loudest skeptics had feared. Since it rested on a massive pillar of solid stone in the midst of a deep lake, nobody had come close to finding a reasonable way to attack it.

And the armies from the east were closing in.

The military leaders were doing all they could to prepare. East Keep was in excellent shape. Ferrin had helped them capture the fortress virtually undamaged. The gates were intact, the catapults and ballistae still functioned, and the interior buildings had not been burned or bombarded.

Brin had kept men busy with heavy projects. At the other keeps, teams had walled off the smashed gates. Strategic trenches had been dug around the keeps and the town beside the ferry. Traps had been set along likely approaches the enemy might use. Men fletched arrows and collected stones to hurl from the walls.

After making sure the keeps were fully manned, Galloran had sent forces to upgrade some of the ruins on the north side of the valley that held high ground. He had arranged his forces to defend against the inevitable onslaught from the east and the possible simultaneous attack from the soldiers who currently held the passes.

Rachel could not help noticing that the preparations mostly centered on withstanding the oncoming armies, not on conquering Felrook. Not that she blamed anyone. She didn't have any better ideas. They had sent scouts to probe for weaknesses. Those who made it back had nothing favorable to report.

The military leaders were preparing for the part of the campaign they could understand—how to go down fighting when the approaching armies arrived.

None of them had a clue how to even bother Felrook. Every day that went by, it seemed less likely that a last-minute message from Jason could somehow turn things around.

Staring at the implacable bulk of the elevated stronghold, Rachel could not help but wallow in all her old doubts. She had striven to disregard her concerns about the prophecy. She had tried to ignore that their mission appeared increasingly impossible. She had attempted to borrow faith from others, to lean on their judgment in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. And here they were, without a workable strategy, waiting to die.

How long was she supposed to keep hoping? Until the enemy armies came into view? Until her friends had fallen? Until she was dead?

There was nothing else left to accomplish. There were no soldiers to muster, no roads to walk, no preliminary challenges to distract from the final goal. They had reached the end of the road, and victory remained as impossible as it had seemed from afar.

Rachel bowed her head. What if the rest of this depended on her? What if the point had been to get her to Felrook with an army ready to take advantage of the opening she would provide? She was the one person with an invitation into the stronghold. What if she accepted the offer, then found a way to create an opening for Galloran and the others?

Or was she just scared? Did she want to hide inside Felrook to avoid being killed by the oncoming armies? Did she want to call "time-out" and try to save herself and her friends before the war really started?

If she secured immunity for her friends, some might not take it. But some might, once the armies arrived and the cause was lost.

Rachel gazed at Felrook, trying to picture Maldor inside, trying to envision the lurkers. What good was she doing out here? At least if she went inside, she would be taking action. Out here she would sit still, use Edomic to protect her friends when the enemy forces arrived, and then die.

Or else Jason would suddenly reveal some hidden path to victory. Maybe some secret weakness to Felrook? Was that really possible? Was it realistic? And if it happened, might she not still be in a better position to take advantage of the weakness if she were already inside of Felrook?

Her Edomic had gotten strong. The fall of West Keep had offered proof. And she hadn't even reached her limit. Not really. She hadn't lost consciousness like with the zombies. But if she sat still, doing nothing, the help she might otherwise offer would be wasted.

Nobody would ever ask her to accept Maldor's offer in order to spy on him and try to harm Felrook from the inside. Galloran was far too protective of her. If she meant to get involved in that way, she would have to take action on her own.

How could she get to Felrook? She would have to steal a boat or something. Nobody would let her leave East Keep unescorted. And what did she know about handling a boat? She would never get close to Felrook on her own. If Maldor really wanted her, he would have to come and get her.

Rachel slipped off the protective charm necklace. Was she really doing this? There were only a few days left. If she wanted time to accomplish anything after her arrival, it was now or never.

She closed her eyes and projected her thoughts, pushing all her mental energy toward Felrook. *Maldor? Anyone?* She sensed no reply. *I'm not sure if anyone can hear me. I'll accept your offer to come train with you, but you'll have to get me there. I have no way to access your fortress. I'm at the keep east of you. Help me get to you, and I'll come.*

Rachel opened her eyes. Felrook looked the same. She had exerted her will intensely, but she sensed no reply. She slipped the necklace back around her neck. Should she try again from the edge of the lake? Maybe she was too far from the fortress? Was it possible that she had been heard, even though she perceived no response?

Ferrin surprised Rachel, addressing her from behind. "If we could tear down those walls with excessive staring, Maldor would already be homeless."

Rachel could not avoid jumping a little at the sound of his voice. Turning, she tried to smile, hoping she looked less rattled than she felt. How long had he been there? Had he seen her replace the charm necklace? "It's so big."

"I didn't mean to startle you."

"I was getting myself all wound up. I keep trying to see something that all the others have missed. If they can get me close enough, I could at least throw our remaining orantium at it."

"We would be asking a few gnats to devour a bull," Ferrin said. "We could do some superficial damage with the remaining orantium. We could destroy the gates, but they would collapse the access path, leaving the castle entrance unreachable except by mountaineers. We could shatter some battlements. But to what end? Few enemy lives would be lost, and broken walls can be mended. Better that we use the orantium to defend ourselves. Our foes should pay to claim our lives."

“Do you think it will come to that?” Rachel asked. “A desperate last stand?”

“None of us want that to be the case,” Ferrin replied. “Although we came here aware that we would probably fail, some naive portion of us stubbornly yearns for victory. But we have reached the hour when only a miracle could save us. I was sent to fetch you. Galloran wishes to confer.”

“With me?” Rachel wondered.

“With those of us who set out from Mianamon together.”

“Is there news?”

Ferrin nodded. “None of it good, so far as I understand.”

Rachel drew her veil in front of her face. “Who died?”

Ferrin took her hand, his voice softening. “Nobody, as far as we know. We’re simply running out of time. Come.”

The displacer led her down from the wall, across the busy yard, and into the keep. Rachel had grown accustomed to stares wherever she went. She had learned that if she didn’t want attention, she shouldn’t dress like a mysterious mourner and show off her magical powers in front of thousands of witnesses. She and Ferrin climbed stairs to the upper hall. Six guards stood at attention outside the heavy doors—two humans, two drinlings, and two seedmen.

Inside they found Galloran, Io, and Tark. Only five companions were left who had set out from Mianamon together. They seemed a tiny group inside the long, airy hall. A fire roared in a huge hearth. The thick stone walls made the keep permanently chilly. The heavy doors thumped closed.

Galloran was not currently wearing his blindfold, but he held it in his hand. He rose and greeted them, offered them seats, then put it on.

“We have had little time to converse in private since marching to war,” Galloran began. “Because the end is upon us, I want your counsel without the pressure of unfamiliar ears. Let me lay out our predicament as I understand it, and then please feel free to speak openly.”

“Okay,” Rachel said. The others nodded.

“Our scouts have been watching the east. The armies of Maldor will arrive in less than three days, their numbers virtually uncountable. If something does not change, no matter what tactics we employ, they will swarm in and massacre us all. We might not even get the opportunity to make them test our best defenses. If they so desired, they could wipe out our unsheltered forces, then lay siege to the keeps. Why storm the walls when they have all the time they desire to starve us out? Of course, if Maldor wishes to crush us faster, the bloodier option remains open.”

“Can we run?” Ferrin asked. “Have you considered alternatives to the passes?”

“There are some lesser ways through the mountains,” Galloran said. “No doubt you are familiar with some of them—minor trails, no true roads. We could flee into the western wilderness and let our foes hunt us. Some of our best woodsmen might win free, but the majority of our forces would perish in disorganized mayhem.”

“Wouldn’t that mess up the prophecy?” Rachel asked. “If we ran?”

“It could,” Galloran said. “Destroying Felrook was our mission. Whether we fight the oncoming armies or flee them, without an assault of Felrook it seems we would be abandoning the prophecy. Ferrin, have you any idea how near Jason might be to his destination?”

“He keeps the ear well muffled,” Ferrin said. “Voices are indecipherable. Anything I hear is faint. I know they were on horseback for several days. Certain sounds of their travel were unmistakable. But now they are on foot. What the change means, I cannot say.”

“It could mean they’re close,” Rachel said.

“It could mean they ran into trouble and had to leave their horses behind,” Ferrin said. “I do believe they remain alive and free.”

“I wish we could signal our need to them,” Galloran said. “Our lack of combat on the way here brought us to Felrook faster than anyone could have reasonably estimated. I’m not sure they could possibly guess our current state of urgency.”

“Any progress on cracking Felrook?” Ferrin asked.

“None,” Galloran said. “From the outset it appeared to be a problem without a solution. That remains unchanged. We appear to be utterly without recourse.”

“Should we try anyway?” Rachel urged. “I mean, if we can’t run, and we can’t stand and fight, we might as well go down attacking Felrook. It would be the closest thing to what the prophecy wanted. Who knows? If they think we can’t win, maybe they won’t collapse the path up to the gate. It would be a hassle to rebuild. We have orantium. We have tough fighters. Maybe some of us could get inside. Maybe some warrior could make it all the way to Maldor.”

“It would be a futile act of desperation,” Galloran said. “But I would prefer it to doomed inaction or to the carnage that would attend a frantic retreat.”

“When would we launch such an offensive?” Ferrin asked.

“We should give Jason every possible minute to provide a better alternative,” Galloran said. “If we mean to attack Felrook with blind faith, I say we wait until

the day before the eastern armies reach us. We will either breach the walls quickly or not at all.”

Ferrin rubbed his eyes. “None of these alternatives inspire any hope in me. They are all madness.”

“I heartily agree,” Galloran said. “Rachel, we could still mount an attack on the gateway to the Beyond and send you home.”

Rachel sighed. “It probably wouldn’t get me home. Not really. The flow of time between our worlds is messed up. The oracle gave me a certain day that would get me close to my own time. I’ve been keeping track. That day is still more than four years away.”

“Would you rather die than risk ending up in the wrong time period?” Galloran asked frankly.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said. “I mainly wanted to go home to be with my parents. I’m not sure if I’d want to live at any other time in my world. There are tons of time periods that would be nightmarish for a girl like me who grew up in modern America. Could we use that option as a last resort? If all else fails, maybe we can all fall back to the gateway and escape to my world.”

“We would have to plan for it before the last moment,” Ferrin said. “Maldor will not want us near his gateway once he has enough soldiers here to impede us. We would have to go there before the eastern armies arrive.”

“It might be something to—” Galloran stopped, cocking his head. He pulled off his blindfold. “I sense lurkers.” After they had reached Felrook, he had stopped wearing the charm Drake had given him to shield his mind. Galloran had decided that he would rather be aware of the lurkers than try to hide from them. “Closer than usual. More than one, closing swiftly.” He rose to his feet, looking around. “They seem to be—”

Upper windows on both sides of the hall shattered, and wraithlike figures bearing swords dropped into the room. Two dashed to block access to the large door at the end of the hall. The other three loosely surrounded the small meeting. All five lurkers held a pair of swords.

Rachel felt a horrible chill. What was going on? Had she done this? Why so many lurkers? Why all the swords?

“This is unprecedented,” Ferrin said, rising and drawing his torivorian sword.

“One for each of us?” Tark growled.

“No,” Galloran said, his blade ringing as he unsheathed it. “I sense their intent. They want Rachel. They will do anything to take her from us. Three will oppose me at once if necessary.”



“Not if I have a say,” Io declared. Holding up an empty hand, he marched toward a torivor. The dark being tossed him a blade.

“No!” Rachel shrieked. “Don’t fight them!” This wasn’t what she had wanted. She had pictured some agent of Maldor helping her sneak away from East Keep alone in the night.

Heedless of her words, Io rushed forward. The lurker resisted him with casual grace. The blades chimed five times before Io was stabbed, and once more before the torivor cut him down definitively.

Rachel whimpered. She couldn’t breathe. Her mind felt frozen. Her guts twisted in dreadful knots.

The torivors moved with liquid grace, unhurried but deliberate. The two at the doors came forward. Joined by one of the others, they formed a perfect triangle around Galloran, all facing him, all holding their pairs of swords vertically. Another lurker was nearing Ferrin, while the one who had vanquished Io came toward Rachel.

Tark edged over to stand in front of Rachel, his knife ready. As he leaned forward she laid a staying hand on his solid shoulder. No matter how horrified and ashamed she felt, she could not let this go on any longer or all her friends were going to die.

“No, Tark,” Rachel managed, relieved that her voice held steady. “Wait.”

None of the lurkers had tossed their swords to begin their duels. Rachel pulled off her charm necklace. *Why so many of you?* she asked the nearest lurker.

*You desire passage to Felrook. Five were sent. Five came.*

*Don’t do this,* Rachel conveyed earnestly. *Don’t harm them.*

*Only you can prevent more bloodshed,* the lurker informed her. *We will fight if opposed. Have your guardians stand down.*

Rachel looked to Galloran. Every part of her wanted to conceal that she had summoned these lurkers. Had he heard her exchange with them? Would he let her go without an explanation? She could not afford to wait. If she hesitated, her friends would die.

*No,* Galloran warned her sharply. *Don’t succumb. This is extortion. He wants you. This incursion means Maldor is feeling desperate. Jason must be close to his goal.*

Her thoughts felt nakedly obvious. How much did he know? *I called them,* Rachel conveyed. *I asked for Maldor to bring me to him.* Could she explain that she meant to betray the emperor? Would the lurkers overhear? Were they overhearing now?

Rachel, Galloran communicated, the word full of despair. The emotion behind it made her feel lost. The king looked defeated.

*I wanted to help,* Rachel tried. *We seemed to be at a dead end.*

“It’s really quiet,” Ferrin said. He was edging away from the lurker facing him. “Are we in the midst of a silent negotiation? I take it they want Rachel?”

“She is willing to go,” Galloran pronounced. “You don’t need to do this, Rachel. We’ll stand with you.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Rachel,” Ferrin said. “He’ll ruin you. Don’t go because of us. Don’t worry about me.” He charged his lurker.

“No!” Rachel cried.

The lurker only defended itself with one weapon. Blades blurred and chimed. Ferrin’s attack was so intense that for the first couple of moments they almost looked evenly matched. Then Ferrin was dodging away, entirely on the defensive. Then the lurker chopped him in half at the waist.

Ferrin kept swinging, forcing the lurker to crouch and continue defending itself. Ferrin’s legs slid the lower half of his body toward the upper half. Within another few swings, the lurker decapitated Ferrin. The headless torso kept fighting. Pressing the attack, the lurker hacked off Ferrin’s sword arm.

“*Stop!*” Rachel screamed with her mouth and mind. “*Stop and I’ll come! Don’t hurt him! Don’t kill them or I stay!*”

Still holding two swords, the torivor backed away from Ferrin.

“No, Rachel,” Ferrin said, pulling his head back into place. “Take it back.” He reached for his arm.

“I’ll come,” Rachel repeated in a small voice, her gaze shifting to the nearest lurker. It was the only way to protect Galloran and the others. “Leave them alone and I’ll come.”

The torivor that had slain Io stepped forward. Tark moved to block it. “I vowed to protect you.”

“I made my choice, Tark,” Rachel said, her voice hard. “This is over. Protect Galloran. Serve him well.”

The lurker stepped around Tark and hefted Rachel effortlessly over its shoulder. It radiated cold. She tried not to let her hands touch it.

*Be strong,* Galloran thought to her with the fierce urgency of a final message. *Do not let him own you.*

The lurkers scattered, heading for the high windows. Rachel’s lurker leaped and then climbed the wall like a spider. Her weight seemed to cause it no

trouble. *I'll do my best*, Rachel answered. *I'm sorry. I didn't know they would come like this. Win!*

The lurker carried Rachel out the window and down the wall, and crossed the yard at inhuman speed. Startled faces blurred by. Her lurker jumped halfway up a staircase, then onto a roof, and then sprang to the outer wall, nimbly climbing what remained. Once beyond the wall the lurker went from feeling like her own private roller coaster to her own personal race car. Wind gushed over her as they sped to the lake. She felt only mildly surprised when the water failed to slow them.

# THE NARROW WAY

It was well into the afternoon before superheated water spewed from the mouth of the Scalding Caverns. At first Jason heard a wet hissing, followed by a sloshing that reminded him of Jugard's cave by the sea. Then foamy water began to drool from the irregular gap along the juncture where the rocky slope straightened into a cliff. The flow of sizzling slaver increased, first gushing, then raging, gusting out in a sideways geyser.

After maybe ten minutes the steamy torrent began to slacken, calming until white froth ceased to bubble from the dark opening. As more minutes passed, the hissing and gurgling diminished until the cave became still. All that remained of the impressive eruption was the moisture glistening on the stony slope, the wetness rather narrow at the cave mouth, then widening until the slope ended at the shore of a sizable lake.

"We're going in there?" Nia asked incredulously.

"Now is the safest moment," Farfalee said. "The instructions specified that the best time to enter is immediately following an eruption."

They had awaited the event for hours. Farfalee and Jasher had already explained that they had to move through the Scalding Caverns quickly. The directions detailed every twist and turn of their route and emphasized that there were several points along the way where additional eruptions could occur. The timing of when scalding water would flood the caverns was inconstant, so the suggested strategy was to make no wrong turns and keep a brisk pace.

The entrance to the caverns was tucked up against an intimidating wall of cliffs that impeded access to the rugged mountains beyond. If they made it through to the far side of the caverns, they would supposedly exit into a tall, narrow ravine that would lead them to Darian.

They had awaited the eruption off to the side of the opening, so it did not take them long to reach the cave mouth. Jasher led the way, followed by his wife. Del and Heg brought up the rear. Jasher carried glowing seaweed, as did Nia, Jason, and Heg.

The beginning of the cave was steep, snug, and relatively straight. Beads of moisture clung to the warm walls, and the heavy reek of sulfur made Jason wrinkle his nose. As they progressed down the long, winding slope, Jason noticed that, unlike in other caves he had entered, the air was getting warmer the farther they went.

They shuffled forward as hurriedly as the moist slope would permit. In many places Jason had to duck or turn sideways. Where possible he braced his hands against the damp walls to keep from sliding. He could not shake the thought that if the cave erupted anytime soon, they would end up like ants exploring a fire hose.

After what seemed like an endless descent, the cave leveled out a little. Unfortunately, the way forward became more cramped. Before long they were crawling on hands and knees, the walls close on either side. Eventually the confining passage opened into a low room with a few branching tunnels, all of them smaller than Jason would have preferred.

After a moment of hasty deliberation, Jasher and Farfalee fell flat and slithered into the smallest opening. Jason ended up behind Corinne, watching the soles of her shoes as he scooted forward. He tried not to picture people getting stuck ahead and behind him, trapping him there until the next boiling eruption washed through. He tried not to speculate whether the heat or the lack of air would kill him first.

Jason hated when the low passage twisted. More than once, contorting his body to scoot around a corner left him panicked that he would get stuck. He felt tempted to shed his gear and leave it behind, but knew he would want it once he reached the far side. He kept worming forward, the muggy air smelling so richly of minerals that he could almost taste the grit between his teeth.

After some time they were able to crawl on hands and knees again; then at last they could walk. The way sloped down some more, twisting enough to leave Jason completely disoriented. The cave remained confining, and they often had to advance by turning sideways. If Aram had been big, Jason doubted whether he would have managed to squeeze through some of the tighter spaces.

The air kept getting hotter. It felt like hiking through an earthy sauna. They passed a misshapen cavity that steadily vented scorching steam. The way dipped lower. From down a steeply branching tunnel Jason could hear water hissing and churning. Everyone else seemed to notice the splashing as well, and by silent agreement they started advancing faster.

After a few more twists, turns, and branching corridors, the odor of sulfur became so oppressive that Jason started to gag. The air grew steamier. Even when he clamped a hand over his mouth, the pungent vapor coated his throat with silty flavors.

Abruptly the way opened into a tremendous cavern. A ledge wrapped around one side of the room. The wide chamber had no floor. Instead, down below, a thick, dark pool churned ominously, belching fat bubbles and noxious fumes.

“A true cavern at last,” Heg remarked. “I was beginning to question whether these puny tunnels should be renamed the Scalding Rabbit Holes.”

“This chamber is evidence that we’re moving in the right direction,” Farfalee called back. “Stay with us.”

Jason inched out onto the ledge after Corinne. The blistering air stung his eyes, and steam fogged his vision. He tried to breathe through the material of his sleeve to help strain the smothering fumes. The narrow ledge was slick with oily dampness, which made every step risky. He edged forward cautiously, sliding his feet rather than lifting them. To fall would mean certain death.

At the far side of the ledge Jason followed Corinne into a crack in the wall. Bracing against the sides of the fissure, he had to chimney up for twenty feet before reaching where the tunnel continued.

Once the hellish cavern was behind them, they increased their pace again. Jason was relieved to find the air growing a bit fresher. “I can breathe a little,” he said.

“What a treat,” Corinne replied without turning.

“If the air had gotten any thicker, it would have become solid.”

That earned a chuckle.

Their path was trending up more than down now, and they had a little more space to maneuver. From up ahead they heard loud gurgling and sloshing. Jasher started to jog, and the others matched his pace. Drenched in greasy sweat, Jason panted shallowly. His head started to pound.

They reached an intersection where the corridor forked. The sound of heaving water noisily emanated from the left passage. Jasher headed right.

From behind, the sloshing increased to a blustery roar.

“Faster!” Del called.

Their pace increased to a sprint. The cave was growing narrow, so Jason jostled against the sides as he ran, scraping his shoulders. He pulled against the knobby walls where possible to keep his momentum. The muscles in his legs burned, and a sharp pain corkscrewed into his side. The watery roar behind him

increased in ferocity. A moist, sweltering gale swept over him. He expected a searing tide to overcome him at any moment.

The tight cave broadened into a roomy cavern. Leg muscles protesting, Jason dashed across the cavern, a couple of paces behind Corinne. He followed her up a slope at the far side of the room and into another cramped tunnel. A jagged stone protuberance slashed the outside of his upper arm as he blundered against it. He hardly felt the pain. Behind him he heard water hissing and surging.

“Duck,” Corinne called back to him.

He relayed the message back to Aram and crouched low. Soon he was hurriedly crawling, his knees and elbows suffering because of his haste. His heart hammered rapidly. He felt like a participant in a nightmare marathon designed to drive claustrophobics insane.

“We might be clear,” Heg called from behind. “The cavern behind us had many offshoots. I think it absorbed the eruption.”

The way sloped more dramatically upward. The air kept feeling less suffocating. They no longer tried to crawl at a sprint, but they continued to hurry. After falling flat to wriggle through a low gap, they could stand again.

Steam vents and threatening gurgles became less frequent. The air cooled and freshened. Jason felt less edgy. The steepness tired his legs, but the evidence that they were on their way out of the subterranean maze boosted his spirits.

At last, drenched and panting, caked with grime, they emerged from an aperture near the bottom of a deep chasm. Vertical walls of rock loomed at either hand, leading to an unreachable strip of sky high above. Water flowed from wall to wall along the floor of the gorge, before slurping underground twenty feet below the gap they had exited.

“The river helps feed the caverns,” Farfalee noted. “This is the Narrow Way. We must proceed until we reach the falls.”

“Where’s the trail?” Nia asked.

“The river is the trail,” Jasher replied. “We walk upstream.”

Fortunately, the river was not raging. The current was steady, but it slowed where the gorge widened. At some points islands or ledges poked out of the water. Most of the time they slogged upriver with the water level somewhere between their knees and waists.

Unlike in the Scalding Caverns, this water was cool. Almost too cool, though not unbearable. Jasher tried to choose the easiest route, avoiding deep pools and leading them onto ledges and islands wherever possible. On one long island they paused to eat and refresh themselves.

Corinne looked skyward. "Stars are coming out. Why is Aram still small?"

"Could be that the deep gorge is creating a premature twilight," Farfalee said.

"Aye," Aram confirmed. "The way my condition works, standing in a shadowy canyon does not count as sundown. I won't change until the sun drops below the horizon we would see from up top. I've developed a sense for it over the years. Feels like it will be another couple of hours yet."

After the break they plodded onward. In some places they had to wade up to their chests or even swim a little. The gorge grew gloomier with every passing minute. Jason was glad for his seaweed.

While they forced their way forward against a waist-deep current, Jason noticed Corinne shivering. She hugged her elbows close, and her neck was pebbled with gooseflesh.

"Corinne is freezing," Jason announced.

"I'll be fine," she replied hastily, unable to prevent her teeth from chattering. "The evening is warm."

"Water saps heat faster than air," Aram said. "I'm feeling it too."

"We'll pause to recover on the little island up ahead," Farfalee said. She held up a hand. "Wait a moment. Stop and listen." Everyone came to a halt.

"The falls," Nia said.

Jason heard them too. "We've got to be close."

Upon reaching the island, they could find no materials for a fire, but Jasher produced a dry blanket for Corinne to use after she had wrung out her clothes. Nia tirelessly rubbed Corinne's arms, shoulders, back, and legs to help warm her.

Heg stood on the far side of the island beside Farfalee, gazing toward the unseen falls. "Do you suppose we'll reach the falls tonight?" Heg asked.

"I expect so," Farfalee said. "I think we should press on until we get there. The sooner we learn what the seer has to offer, the sooner Galloran can benefit from the information."

"Aram, when will you grow?" Heg called.

"Not much longer."

In a single quick movement Heg drew his dagger and stabbed Farfalee in the chest. Cupping his hand against the back of her neck, he caught her seed as it came free. As her body collapsed, Heg held the bloodstained dagger point to her amar.

"No!" Jasher cried, face contorting with shock and rage as he drew his sword.

Jason had been removing some dried meat from his pack. He remained in a crouch, petrified with astonishment.



“Everyone keep still!” Heg demanded. “It would be tragic to see such a long and illustrious life obliterated.”

Jasher restrained himself and gestured for the others to stand down. “What is the meaning of this?”

“We needed to have this conversation at some point before reaching the falls. Now seemed the opportune moment.”

“You’re not Heg,” Del accused. “You can’t be. What’s going on?”

“Correct,” Heg said with a smile. “I have been known by many names. Heg is the most recent. The drinling fought valiantly, by the way, but perished back at Gulba alongside his brethren.” Heg’s face suddenly transformed, and with it his voice. It was suddenly the face of Groddic. “In recent years I have most frequently been known as Groddic.”

Jason could hardly believe his eyes. He stood upright, his hand near his sword. He glanced at the others, trying to gauge how they wanted to deal with this.

“The Wanderer,” Jasher growled. “You’re Zokar’s shape-shifter!”

“I have been known by those names as well,” the Wanderer admitted. “None who associate those names with me ever live to tell the tale.”

“Groddic was the Wanderer all along?” Aram asked.

“Maldor was the only man alive to know my true identity,” the Wanderer said. “We became partners long ago. Out of necessity I get no credit, but I was instrumental in his rise to power. He brings me in to fix his messiest problems. Like this one.”

“We killed you,” Nia said weakly.

The Wanderer shook his head. “Hard to slay a shape-shifter. I can heal my wounds too quickly, rearrange my insides. I pretended to succumb to my injuries back at Gulba. The decision could have gone either way. I knew I could probably take you. I stayed down because you had horses. Had I revealed myself, some of you might have escaped and spoiled my secret. I suspected a better opportunity would come. And here we are.”

“You captured the eagle,” Corinne accused, her teeth no longer chattering.

The Wanderer grinned. “I became a jungle condor, a bird much larger than any eagle. I can reshape myself into any living thing I have touched. I have lived a long time, sampled many life-forms. Including Heg.”

Jason thought about his orantium sphere. He couldn’t throw it while the Wanderer held Farfalee’s seed. He pulled out his sword. Whatever happened, he needed to be ready.

“Why are we talking?” Jasher asked. “Have you an offer?”

“That depends what the amar of your wife is worth,” the Wanderer said casually. Keeping the knifepoint near the seed, he examined it speculatively. “I have never disposed of a sitting member of the Conclave.”

“If you harm her amar, you will face the eternal wrath of my people,” Jasher threatened.

“I have destroyed more than twenty amars,” the Wanderer bragged. “There can be no vengeance against secret deeds.”

“I cannot guess what terms you could possibly offer,” Jasher said.

“Her seed is the only concession I can grant,” the Wanderer said. “All Farfalee knew before she was cut off from her senses was that Heg stabbed her. She does not know it was the Wanderer. She did not know that Heg had any connection to Groddic. If you volunteer your amar to me, Jasher, I swear to safely plant her seed.”

“What about the others?” Jasher asked.

“The others know my identity. They must die. But your wife could live. If you fight me, she dies along with the rest of you. Make your choice.”

Jason held his breath, wondering which way Jasher would lean.

“I don’t trust you to keep your word,” Jasher said.

“I can alter my face at will,” the Wanderer said. “My only lasting identity is my honor. I am not lying. Knowing as little as your wife does, what does it cost me to spare her? I will keep her seed safe until this war is over, and then she will be planted. Who knows? She might emerge as the last of your people.”

“How do you propose to claim my amar?” Jasher asked.

“I won’t let you near me,” the Wanderer said. “Let Del execute you and toss me your seed.”

“I would give all my lives for her,” Jasher said. “But to do so now would be folly.”

The seedman flung a knife and rushed forward, his torivorian blade held high. The Wanderer dodged the thrown dagger and plunged his blade into the seed. Jason felt as if the blade had entered his own body. Casting the seed aside, the Wanderer barely had time to draw Heg’s sword before Jasher reached him.

The blades clashed furiously. Del and Nia followed Jasher, but hung back. The narrowness of the island made it hard for more than one attacker to engage the Wanderer unless they did so from the water.

Jason held his orantium globe ready, but there was no way to harm the Wanderer with Jasher in the way. He could hardly believe the Wanderer had

stabbed the seed. That simple act had permanently extinguished lifetimes of existence. Another of his friends had fallen.

The Wanderer tried to stab Jasher with his dagger and lost his hand in the attempt. The severed hand dissolved into ashen dust. Jasher pressed a graceful attack, but the Wanderer defended himself with alarming skill. With a shake of his damaged arm, a new hand replaced the lost one.

“Watch the combat for an opening,” Aram whispered to Jason. “Groddic stands between us and the waterfall, but while we keep him busy, you could make a run for it. Only one of us needs to survive.”

“He can turn into anything he wants,” Jason said. “He’d catch me before I went far, whether or not he had to interrupt the fight. We have to beat him.”

“Are you about to grow?” Corinne asked Aram.

“Another minute or two,” Aram replied, stripping off his clothes. “I should get my armor ready.”

Jasher stabbed the Wanderer through the chest, the blade sinking deep, but had to lunge back to avoid a counterstroke. The fight went on. The Wanderer appeared indifferent to the injury.

“We have to cut him to pieces!” Jasher yelled. “No other wound will harm him.”

“Many have tried,” the Wanderer boasted with a laugh. “I’ve lost minor portions of myself over the years. More than enough remains to punish the lot of you.”

Del and Nia had splashed into the river to get behind the Wanderer, but the shape-shifter fell back to the tip of the island, preventing them from attacking on dry ground. To further complicate matters, the Wanderer sprouted a heavy tail with a bony bulge at the end and used it to threaten the drinlings. Nia hit the bony knob with her sword, and the weapon flew from her hands.

“He has eyes in the back of his head!” Del exclaimed. “Literally!”

“I’m just getting started,” the Wanderer laughed.

With a muffled groan Aram started to grow.

The Wanderer’s tongue shot out from his mouth and coiled around Jasher’s neck. Jasher slashed through it, and the severed portion disintegrated, but the seedman was late blocking the next thrust, and the Wanderer impaled him.

Dropping to his knees, Jasher cut off the Wanderer’s legs at the thighs. The Wanderer thumped to the ground and lunged into the river. He did not surface. Del and Nia looked around intently, swords poised.

Still transfixed by the sword, eyes full of pain and frustration, Jasher looked back at Jason. “The amar can be resilient. We can’t know the extent of the damage. Plant her immediately. I . . . I still have—”

His sentence was interrupted when his amar dislodged, bouncing off the island and into the water. Jasher slumped lifelessly.

Upstream from everyone, the Wanderer arose from the river. Heg’s clothes were gone. His head looked like Groddic, but he was notably shorter. A flexible black shell covered his body like armor. He held no weapon.

Corinne leaped into the water and grabbed Jasher’s amar before it could float away. His transformation complete, Aram dashed along the island toward the Wanderer, his enormous sword in hand, his armor jingling.

Rushing upstream, Del reached the Wanderer first. The drinling hacked at his chest, but the black armor withstood the blow. Clamping an arm against his side, the Wanderer trapped the blade; then spikes sprouted on his free fist, and he killed Del with a punch to the head. The Wanderer kept the captured sword.

Nia fell back, sloshing noisily. “That shell is tough!” she warned everyone.

“Titan crab,” the Wanderer said bemusedly. “I often reinforce my bones with the remarkable substance. The shell of the titan crab is the most durable biological material I have encountered. I’ll use excessive quantities of it inside of me to disguise my mass when I wish to appear smaller.”

“Are you doing that now?” Aram thundered. He waited at the end of the island. “You’re looking tinier.”

“Jasher robbed me of some mass,” the Wanderer agreed. “And it cost me some size to armor myself like this. Come test your sword against me, half man.”

“I think I’ll keep the high ground,” Aram replied.

“I’m between you and your destination,” the Wanderer replied. “I am in no hurry. Much like Heg, I require no sleep.”

Nia fell back to behind Aram and climbed onto the island. She retrieved Jasher’s torivorian sword.

“We have time as well,” Aram said. “I’ll not be baited.”

The Wanderer laughed. “Three of you have already perished. I could slay the rest of you a thousand ways.” He dropped beneath the water.

“To me,” Aram said.

Swords ready, Jason and Corinne dashed forward to stand beside Nia and the half giant. “I have orantium,” Jason said.

“Don’t use it too close to us,” Aram said. “Jasher had a globe too. Might be worth retrieving.” He crouched and slid Farfalee’s torivorian sword from its

sheath. “When the shape-shifter surfaces, fall back and let me deal with him. I won’t let him win.”

Kneeling and scrabbling, Corinne searched for Jasher’s sphere. Jason scanned the surface of the river.

The Wanderer burst from the water and landed at the other end of the island. For a moment he had gill slits at his neck, but they were abruptly covered by the glossy black carapace. He still held Del’s sword.

Jason flung the orantium sphere low, at his feet. The Wanderer dove forward and caught it in an enlarged, softened hand. Rising to his knees, his hand returning to its normal size, the Wanderer threw the globe back at them.

Dropping his swords, Aram flung Corinne and Jason into the river. Nia dove forward, smothering the globe with her body as it struck the rocky ground.

Jason missed seeing the explosion. He heard it from under the water. When he surfaced, Nia was gone, and Aram lay at the edge of the island, one leg in the river, the side of his face blackened and caked with blood. The Wanderer charged him.

Jason heaved himself from the water. If the Wanderer killed Aram while the half giant was down, they were all dead. Jason got to his feet and gripped his sword as the Wanderer approached at full speed, eyes enraged. Jason had never felt more intimidated, but he stood his ground.

The Wanderer’s sword swept toward him. Leaning forward, Jason met the blade with a strong blow from his own. Despite the Wanderer’s sprint and the strength of his swing, he came to a skidding halt as his sword was knocked back by the impact. For a moment the Wanderer was unprotected. Advancing, Jason issued a quick counterstroke, narrowly missing but forcing the Wanderer to retreat a pace.

Their swords began to clash fiercely. Jason was mildly surprised to not be immediately cut down. He was mostly on the defensive, slowly giving ground, but he managed to sneak in a few attack strokes. Without the torivorian sword, Jason doubted he could have resisted the heavy blows or swung quickly enough to match the Wanderer’s speed. Each slash he survived increased his confidence.

The combat felt different from how he had expected. There was no time to feel nervous. He knew he was fighting for his life, and to protect Aram and Corinne, but all he could focus on was blocking the next blow and watching for chances to attack. There was no time to plan or to give conscious thought to form or footwork. There was barely time to react, and occasionally a narrow opening to strike.

As the fight progressed, Jason felt less and less like he was holding his own. His wrists and elbows began to ache. The Wanderer was so quick and used moves and feints Jason had never encountered. Jason improvised defensive blows and dodged as best he could, but he began to feel sloppy, like he had lost his balance and was about to fall.

Then Corinne attacked Groddic from behind. The shelled warrior turned to confront her, allowing Jason a moment to recover. Her blade kept him busy.

Jason saw the Wanderer staring at him with a large pair of golden eyes on the back of his head. For the moment his rear was unguarded. And clearly Corinne needed help. Jason lunged forward as a tail sprouted from the center of the Wanderer's back. Just before the tip of Jason's sword could reach the Wanderer, the heavy bulge at the end of the tail slammed into Jason's shoulder like a mace, sending him splashing into the river.

Jason surfaced in time to see the Wanderer thump Corinne with his tail while he had her occupied with his sword. She tumbled into the water as well. Teeth bared, the Wanderer wheeled on Aram.

Crawling forward shakily, Aram grabbed Farfalee's torivorian sword, as well as the torivorian sword Nia had dropped. With one side of his leather cloak charred and tattered, the half giant rose unsteadily to meet the attack.

The Wanderer lunged and stabbed at Aram's chest. Raising both swords high, the half giant made no attempt to block the thrust. Instead, he pivoted, so the Wanderer's sword struck his coat of rings at an angle. The tip scraped across the armor, failing to penetrate.

Aram brought the torivorian swords down viciously, severing both of the Wanderer's arms at the shoulders, slicing neatly through the chitinous casing. As the Wanderer struggled to recover, Aram paced forward, torivorian blades hacking in rapid sweeps. Chunks of the Wanderer flew free, turning to dust when parted from his central bulk.

Shrinking as he sprouted new arms, the Wanderer tried a punch and lost the new appendage. The other limb broadened into a defensive rectangle of titan-crab shell, but Aram cleaved it in half. As the Wanderer spun to flee, a brutal horizontal slash bisected him at the waist. The bottom half of the Wanderer crumbled, and Aram savagely attacked what remained. A few more swings, and there was nothing left to cut.

The half giant sank to his knees, breathing hard, as Jason and Corinne returned to the island. Jason's shoulder ached, but he hardly felt the pain through his enormous relief.

“Want to know one of the many things I learned from Drake?” Aram asked without facing them. “With enough force behind them, torivorian blades can tear through the shells of titan crabs. The Wanderer appeared surprised. He had formed a thick shell, and was reinforcing it wherever the blades landed.”

“Are you all right?” Corinne asked.

Aram glanced down at himself. “I’ll live. I lunged away and got low while Nia shielded me from the worst of the blast. You two bought me enough time to recover. Thanks.”

“I shouldn’t have thrown it,” Jason said, his insides writhing.

“You did the right thing,” Aram assured him. “There was no way to anticipate what happened. You aimed low. You did it right. We had to try orantium. The shape-shifter was starting to look unbeatable. He caught the sphere, and Nia paid a price to protect us. That fight could have gone either way, Jason. We got lucky at the end. You two were magnificent. You crossed swords with the Wanderer and will live to tell the tale. I tried to act more stunned than I really was, and the Wanderer took the bait. He expected to finish me quickly. And I suspect he was overconfident about his shell armor. I would wager he has killed many an opponent while they fruitlessly strike at him.”

“Are you all right?” Jason asked Corinne.

“I was using Drake’s breastplate,” she said. “The tail struck me there. How about your shoulder?”

Jason shrugged it, rolled it, and rubbed it. “Sore, but I don’t think he broke anything. It might turn an interesting color.”

“We got off easy,” Aram grunted. “Others paid the price.”

“Farfalee,” Jason remembered. “Jasher thought she might have a chance if we plant her quickly.”

Corinne went and gingerly collected the seed from where the Wanderer had tossed it aside. She held it in her palm while Jason and Aram investigated it. The casing was split on one side. There was no telling how deep the knife point had penetrated.

“I’m no expert at growing seedfolk,” Aram announced, “but this island seems to be little more than a rock pile. All of the ledges and other islands have been similar. I have seen nothing growing down here. There is no soil, and infrequent sunlight.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “It won’t do her any good to bury her seed under barren rocks.”

“Back by the lake,” Corinne said. “On the other side of the caverns there were some fertile areas by the lakeside. At least as fertile as the Fuming Waste gets.”

“I won’t fit through those caves until after dawn,” Aram said.

“I can do it,” Corinne offered. “I was paying attention to the way.”

“I was trying to do the same,” Aram said. “There were some puzzling junctions. You don’t want to get lost in there.”

“There could be fertile ground up ahead,” Jason said.

“Possible,” Aram allowed, “though not likely based on what I’ve seen.”

Corinne had crouched to rifle through Jasher’s pack. “Here is his orantium,” she said, holding up the last of their spheres. Setting the globe aside, she kept searching. “I know Farfalee translated the directions. They must be in here somewhere. Here we go.” She produced the pages of notes. “Thankfully, he kept them dry.”

“I should double-check what I need to do,” Jason said.

Holding a glowing strand of seaweed close, Corinne scanned the writing. “I see nothing they failed to tell us. The entrance is under the waterfall. You should enter alone and unarmed. If you are unworthy, you won’t survive. There are no further details.”

“I hope I’m worthy,” Jason said.

“I’ve been watching all of this closely,” Aram said. “That oracle knew her business. If I harbored any doubts before, they have flown. We would not have made it this far without each person she selected. Drake stopped the duel with the torivor. Corinne got rid of the spying lurker. Jason figured out how to defeat the Maumet. Farfalee translated the scroll. And the Wanderer required a team effort. Jasher weakened it. Nia shielded us. That same oracle who chose our team wanted you here, Jason. She would not have sent you to perish as an unworthy trespasser. I don’t expect this seer has ever had a more worthy visitor.”

The reasoning brought Jason comfort.

“I should go,” Corinne said. “I want to get Farfalee and Jasher in the ground.”

“It will be dangerous,” Aram said. “You won’t be able to start immediately after an eruption.”

“I would face the same peril whenever I return,” Corinne said.

“Let me study the instructions,” Aram said. “I paid close attention, and I have a reliable sense of direction. Give me a moment to memorize what I need. Then you bring these pages with you and wait for us on the far side.”

“Are you sure you can make it though without them?” Corinne asked.



“I could probably retrace our route even without studying the instructions,” Aram claimed. “As we came through, I looked back often. Give me a moment.”

The half giant sat staring at the writing, one finger sliding across the words, his lips moving occasionally. At times he would close his eyes, move his lips, and then check himself. Finally, he handed the pages back to Corinne. “Keep out of sight on the other side.”

“I’ll be careful,” Corinne promised. She gave Jason a hug. “You be careful too.”

“We’ll see you soon,” Jason said.

# SECRETS FROM THE PAST

By the time Jason and Aram reached the waterfall, the crescent moon peeked down into the chasm, rendering their seaweed temporarily unnecessary. The silver ribbon of water plummeted from a ledge half the height of the gorge, churning in a misty basin at the bottom.

“The water is dropping a long distance,” Aram said, gazing upward. “The volume may not look impressive, but it is hitting with enough force to pin a man to the riverbed and keep him there until long after he drowns.”

“I’ll watch for barrels of air,” Jason said.

Aram smirked. “I would approach from the side. If you end up pressed to the ground, claw your way under the falls.” He tied a length of seaweed around Jason’s wrist.

“I guess I should leave my sword,” Jason said. He handed it to Aram. “I’ll bring the shield.”

“I’ll stand guard until you return,” Aram promised.

Jason was wet and shivering from hiking up the river. He stared at the falls, psyching himself up for the swim. He considered those who had lost their lives to get him here. Heg and the other drinlings. Drake. Jasher, temporarily. Farfalee, maybe forever. Nia. He had to push away the memories. If he dwelled on them now, he would be unable to go forward. “The secret behind those falls had better be useful,” he muttered.

“Amen,” Aram agreed.

Jason plunged into the cold pool. He approached the falls from the right, staying close to the wall of the cliff. The closer he came to the base of the waterfall, the more he felt currents tugging at him.

After waving at Aram, Jason held his breath and dove down, grateful for the radiance of the seaweed around his wrist, although at first all he saw was a shimmering screen of illuminated bubbles. The force of the falling water helped him sink quickly. He kicked and stroked hard, trying to get behind the falls. The turbulence actually helped him, drawing him downward and inward.

Sure enough, at the bottom of the basin, below and behind the falls, he found a large gap in the wall. Swimming inside, he passed along a short tunnel before surfacing in a placid pool inside a cavern. Jason breaststroked to where he could walk, then waded out of the water, shivering in the cool air.

Before him Jason saw a bronze door, incongruous against the natural stone of the cavern wall. He stared at it with relief. At least *something* was hidden behind the waterfall. People had died to get him here. Many other people were counting on him.

He wondered what Rachel was doing at the moment. Had Galloran raised his army? Were they on the move against Felrook? Living on the run, Jason and his companions hadn't had the opportunity to get much news. Rachel could be anywhere. He hoped her team was having an easier time than his group had endured. Maybe whatever the door concealed would keep her from suffering too much. After crossing to it, Jason found the door unlocked, and entered.

"Hello?" he called, feeling like an intruder. The word echoed down a long corridor. Beyond the doorway the walls were stone blocks, the floor slate tiles. "Anybody here?"

Leaving the door ajar, Jason crept forward. Eventually the hall turned. Ahead he could see a quivering red radiance. "Hello?"

Again the only answer was his voice returning from the emptiness. At the end of the corridor, Jason reached a circular room with a domed ceiling. Four bronze torches lit the space, held in sconces a few feet out of reach, the flames red as blood. He could not see or smell any smoke. The deep redness of the flames seemed unnatural.

Perfectly round holes of three distinct sizes riddled the wall opposite the entrance to the room. A tiny, neat picture was painted above each hole. Three bronze bins in front of the perforated wall contained spherical white stones, each decorated with a small picture. The stones in one bin were the size of marbles, the next held spheres the size of golf balls, and the last contained stones more comparable to baseballs. The stone spheres seemed to match the three sizes of holes in the wall.

Apart from the holes, engravings textured the wall: runes and glyphs and symbols that Jason had no chance of comprehending. To his surprise, among the foreign shapes and squiggles, he found one concise message in English, the familiar letters etched neatly.

*Do not proceed uninvited. Leave behind all weapons. Deliver a single ball to a single hole. Choose wrong and perish.*

Jason scrutinized the rest of the wall to make sure he had missed no other legible messages. After finding nothing recognizable, he returned to the section of the wall peppered with holes. There appeared to be equal quantities of small, medium, and large perforations—hundreds in total.

He began studying the little paintings above the holes. The details were so minute that the brush must have been no larger than a whisker. The images seemed totally random: Animals, plants, buildings, symbols, articles of clothing, tools, faces, food, flags, and a variety of other objects were depicted.

How could he know which ball to put in which hole? It had to be a complex lock, like the door at the Repository of Learning. Did the little paintings on the balls match the images on the holes? Could it be that straightforward?

Jason scooped out two handfuls of medium-sized balls and began sifting through them, looking for an image that matched an image on the wall. The little icons on the balls seemed just as diverse as the images on the wall, but he was having trouble finding anything that matched.

He decided to focus on one ball. He chose one decorated with the tusked head of a golden elephant. He liked the image because it was so distinct. Walking along the wall with the ball, he looked for a matching image above a hole. His eyes darted from hole to hole, glancing at everything but with emphasis on the medium ones. His eyes stopped on an image above one of the large holes.

He did not pause because the image was an elephant.

He halted because the image was the face of his father.

Unable to make sense of what he was seeing, Jason stared in stunned befuddlement. He drew close, squinting. The picture was not quite as perfect as a photograph, but it seemed as unmistakable. The resemblance was uncanny, like a really good caricature. But how could that picture be *here*? His father had never been to Lyrian. And this place was supposed to be really old.

Could there have been a man in Lyrian who looked like his father? Could the artist have imagined a face that happened to look a lot like his father? Could it just be a coincidence?

Darian was supposed to be a seer. The oracle had made it sound like Jason was destined to come here. This couldn't be coincidence. The face was too spot on. This hole mattered.

Unsure exactly what he was looking for, Jason went to the bin of large balls and started sorting through them one by one. Would he find his father's face

again? Perhaps it would be an image somehow connected with his father. Like what? His car? His dental office? A toothbrush?

After going through all the large balls, Jason had found no obvious candidate. He supposed a smaller ball could be placed in a large hole, so he moved down to the medium spheres. He stopped sorting through them when he found his mother's face.

The image gave him chills. It was just as accurate as the picture of his father. This was no coincidence.

Jason looked around. Was he really still in Lyrian? This almost felt like an elaborate practical joke. He half expected friends to jump out and yell, "Surprise!" But no friends appeared. There were no hidden cameras either. Just torches and a gloomy old room. Gazing at the image of his mother, Jason thought about all that had happened to bring him to this place. It was no joke. No accident. He was supposed to be here.

Confident that he had found the correct match, Jason placed the medium ball into the hole under his father's picture, then backed away. He could hear the ball rolling, followed by some clicks, and suddenly the floor of the room began to gradually descend.

Jason considered retreating to the hallway, but he opted instead to stay put. As the floor sank deeper, a passageway was revealed. When the floor rumbled to a halt, he could see down a long corridor lined with red torches. Apparently, he had made a decent choice.

The long corridor ended at a large square room with multiple circular tunnels in three of the walls. Four sconces held four more burning torches. Mystifying engravings decorated the fourth wall. Among them Jason found a brief message in English.

*Proceed along the passage of your choice.*

All the round tunnels were the same size—small enough that he would have to crawl. To reach some of the tunnels he would have to climb using the openings to lower tunnels. Tiny paintings wreathed the mouth of each tunnel.

Jason started studying the images, wondering if he would encounter another familiar face. To the side of one of the higher tunnels on the opposite wall from the entrance, Jason found a familiar logo—the profile of a white batter silhouetted against a blue and red background, a white ball coming his way. It was the logo for Major League Baseball!

That had to be for him, right? Baseball didn't exist in Lyrian, and Jason loved both watching and playing the sport.

Just to be sure, he investigated the pictures around all the other tunnels. None of them resonated like the baseball logo. That had to be it.

Jason climbed back up to the baseball tunnel and started crawling down it. He had not gone far when a heavy gate clanged into place behind him, sealing off his retreat. Without his seaweed Jason would have been left in darkness.

The round tunnel curved, climbed, descended, and turned. His elbows and knees throbbed, still tender from crawling too rapidly in some of the tighter sections of the Scalding Caverns, but his only choice was to press onward.

At length, without ever forking, the tunnel emptied into the largest room yet. Against the walls eight brazen dragon heads were spaced around the room, each bigger than a pickup truck. In the center of the room three bronze bins held stone balls. Holes of three sizes pocked the floor around the bins. Elsewhere on the floor were engraved messages. Jason skimmed the spidery runes until he located the message in English.

*Drop one ball down one hole.*

"I could have probably figured that out on my own," Jason said to nobody, his voice echoing gently.

Again pictures adorned the balls, and the holes in the floor had accompanying images as well. It took some time, but Jason eventually found a small ball with a tiny portrait of his sister, and a large hole beside the smiling face of his brother.

After dropping the ball down the hole, Jason heard it rolling, then rattling, followed by multiple noisy crunches. Hinges squealing, one of the dragon heads yawned open, revealing another corridor.

Jason trotted down the corridor until it delivered him to a vast hall. Torches hung high against the walls, leaving the middle of the chamber heavily shadowed. Containers of every description crowded the entire length of the floor, some resting on tables or platforms, others unsupported. The collection included trunks, chests, crates, baskets, coffers, cabinets, caskets, coffins, sarcophagi, barrels, kegs, strongboxes, jewelry boxes, and covered vessels. Exemplifying unlimited styles and sizes, the diverse containers were fashioned out of combinations of iron, bronze, copper, tin, stone, wood, ceramics, gold, silver, crystal, jade, ivory, enamel, and wicker. Wide varieties of craftsmanship were represented, from the ornate and the elaborate to the plain and even the shoddy.

At the far end of the room, illuminated by extra torches, rose a dais surmounted by a majestic throne. Plinths supported identical female statues at

either side of the dais, and a broad altar rested upon a lower platform at the front.

This had to be the destination! He had made it! He could hardly believe his eyes.

“Hello?” Jason called, interrupting the silence of the cluttered hall. “Darian? Anybody?”

Lonely echoes formed the only response.

Weaving among the numberless containers, Jason made his way across the long chamber. As he neared the dais, he realized that what he had mistaken for an altar was actually a crystal-and-gold casket with a body inside. The casket rested atop a granite slab with abundant writing on the side. Among many unrecognizable glyphs Jason found the words “Darian the Seer.”

Jason jogged to the casket. Inside rested an old man, small, shriveled, a few wisps of white hair on his spotted head. He wore scarlet robes embroidered with golden designs. Matching slippers covered his bony feet. His eyelids were closed and sunken. His lips were sewn shut. There was a yellowish cast to his wrinkled skin. He had clearly been embalmed.

Shivering, Jason gazed at the cadaver. This was an eerie place to encounter a dead body on display. How long had it been here? People had warned him that Darian should be dead. Still, he could hardly believe that this long, hard road had led him to a corpse. Why had the oracle sent him here?

Just in case, Jason tapped on the glass. “Hello? Are you kidding me? Hello?”

The cadaver did not stir.

Jason looked around in disgust. A gaping, blackened fire pit was set into the stone dais between the throne and the casket. From his slightly elevated position, he surveyed the enormous hall. The disorderly profusion of strange containers made the room look like a flea market or some overgrown garage sale.

He was meant to be here. The oracle had insisted. The faces of his family proved it. He had reached the end of the path. He had found Darian the Seer. Well, sort of. The old guy was fairly well preserved, but no more alive than a mounted deer head.

What was the point? Had his friends suffered and died for nothing? Had Galloran marched off to fight a hopeless battle?

Jason scrutinized the body. The face looked peaceful. Jason studied the faint white eyebrows, the curve of the slightly hooked nose, the little knob of the chin.

Backing away from the casket, Jason looked around the room high and low. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted, "Hello? Anyone? I need some help!"

His plea went unanswered.

There had to be more to this. He roamed the dais and found engravings on the back of the large throne. He hunted eagerly for an English message among the nonsense and found it toward the bottom.

*Open a single container. You will either find a prophecy, or you will die. Do not disturb more than one.*

A flood of relief temporarily overwhelmed Jason. The seer had died, but he had left prophecies behind. Maybe this wasn't a dead end after all.

Returning to stand beside the casket, Jason stared out at the sea of containers. Which would the old seer have expected him to pick? Jason scowled. Would there be an obvious clue? A familiar face? What if he selected the wrong one?

Leaving the dais, Jason roamed among the receptacles. At first he felt most drawn to the big wooden chests bound in iron, partly because they looked like pirates might have hidden treasure inside. But there were numerous chests of that description. He scoured some for clues but found nothing. He decided he should look for something more unique, a container that related to his life in some way. He found a porcelain vessel shaped like a titan crab. The top of it obviously could be lifted off. But the titan crab had been a negative experience, so he kept looking.

Maybe he should pick the fanciest box he could find; then he could keep it. Something with jewels. Would Darian have foreseen he might choose that way? He examined a delicate ivory coffer inset with enamel and crusted with sapphires. It would be worth a fortune. But did it reflect anything about him? What box would Darian most expect him to select?

Paying close attention, unsure what exactly he hoped to see, Jason wandered aimlessly. He looked for words in English, or references to his world, or people he knew, and generally tried to stay open to any item that might call to him. He meandered for a long time. Many objects looked unique or valuable, but he could find nothing that he considered more personally suited to him than the rest.

Maybe he had already passed the container he should have chosen. Maybe he should have gone with his first instinct. Which had been the first container he had wanted to open? A big chest back near the dais. But wouldn't most people



choose something near the dais? After reading the instructions, the first containers they encountered would be those by the dais. Maybe he should go to the far side of the room. Or maybe he should go back to the crab. Or the priceless ivory box. No, if he had been meant to choose those, he would have already done it, right?

Staring at the ground, Jason strolled away from the dais until he approached the far end of the room. Closing his eyes, he turned in a circle with his finger extended, came to a stop, and peeked. He was pointing at an elaborate container the size of a lunch box, carved out of glossy golden wood. It was an impressive piece of workmanship, but the embossed images were all vines and flowers. It looked sort of girly.

Jason sat down on the floor. Maybe he was going about this all wrong. If Darian was such a great seer, shouldn't the message be waiting in whatever box Jason opened? If the task was to guess what container Darian would have picked for him, the cause was hopeless. There were just too many possibilities. Who knew what criteria the seer would have used? But if Darian could really see the future, it shouldn't matter which box Jason picked. Whatever he chose would have to be the right one.

Standing up, Jason looked around. A golden coffer inlaid with tear-shaped jewels and lustrous pearls caught his eye. Resisting the urge to second-guess his decision, he walked over and opened it. The coffer did not explode. No poisonous gas leaked out. Inside he found a scroll.

Sitting and crossing his legs, Jason unrolled the scroll and found a message in English addressed to him. Relief flooded through him, and he began to read.

*My Esteemed Lord Jason,*

*Although we have never met, I feel as if I know you. I have watched you extensively from afar. Should you ever read these words, you will have obtained them at great cost. You will certainly have reason to grieve, and you probably feel distraught and alone. Know that I appreciate what you and your comrades have suffered in order to receive my counsel. On behalf of Lyrian, I thank you.*

Tears blurred Jason's vision. He wiped them away. Strange how appreciation in a note from some dead guy could matter, but it did. He felt a little less alone.

Please pardon my grasp of your language. I apologize in advance if anything I express seems unclear. I have not yet had occasion to communicate in English during my lifetime, nor do I expect to enjoy the opportunity before I expire. I learned your language exclusively by gazing into my flames. My only firsthand practice has involved the composition of messages to potential readers fluent in the future common tongue of Lyrian.

You possess a curious nature. The vital words I must share are few, so allow me the luxury of explaining my mission. Toward the end of my life, I learned to see the past and the future in exquisite detail. Through my visions I recognized that I was the truest seer Lyrian would ever know, and I beheld that without my aid Lyrian would fall into darkness.

I left my home and absconded to a remote setting where I could better control who would access my prophecies, a place that would endure until after my last prophecy held any relevance. You have found that secret lair. I tried to ensure that you would reach my final resting place through assignments given in other prophecies. One of those requests sparked the creation of the Petruscan scroll that led you here.

Although I enjoy vivid visions of the future, I cannot always be certain which of the branching paths the future will take. I see a multitude of possibilities with tremendous clarity, many of them conflicting. There are numerous possible futures where you never read these words. If you are reading these words, many other prophecies I authored have become irrelevant. I have done my best to guard Lyrian as far into the future as I could foresee. Only the coming years will reveal the degree of my success.

More than five thousand prophecies reside in this room. At best fewer than fifteen hundred will actually be read. At worst just more than seventy will be shared. Beyond the five thousand prophecies the room also houses more than a hundred thousand lethal traps, most involving poisons of one sort or another. The vast majority will never claim a life.

I have done what was necessary to protect my messages. I have foreseen many who will seek to undo my work, and I have ensured that if they find their way here, they will perish.

You recognized clues to reach this chamber. A variety of choices lead to this room. Many more alternatives lead to certain death. I spent a great deal of effort ensuring that the choices of those I wanted here would bring them safely to this hall, while also ascertaining that the choices of my enemies would prove fatal.

*I did not use clues on any of the receptacles that hold my messages in an effort to thwart cunning enemies who might use such a hint to intercept a prophecy meant for another. I trusted my visions to get my scrolls into the intended hands.*

*You were meant to find this message, Jason. In truth, of all the prophecies available here, yours is one of the most precious. If you read these words, it is because Lyrian teeters at the brink of unending darkness.*

*Should Maldor succeed, I am unable to view a time when Lyrian recovers. And I can see well beyond your day. Before the end of his reign Maldor will raise up others like him, and their dynasty of tyranny will endure for centuries beyond counting. Perhaps the only blacker end I have perceived for Lyrian involves the plague of Ebera sweeping the continent, an eventuality which has been prevented for the present if you have obtained these words.*

*I know you have fretted over why you were chosen to obtain this prophecy. Allow me to help alleviate that distress. It might be of comfort to know that some of the greatest figures throughout history have failed to recognize their own worth. In short, only with your involvement was there a chance for any who opposed Maldor to succeed.*

Jason reread the words. Could they be true?

*I can see that you will doubt my words. You want reasons. You want to understand. I will cite a few examples. If you are reading this message, you helped make key choices that saved your mission. You took action at pivotal moments that rescued your mission as well. But perhaps more than anything, your influence was required to assemble a team of dissenters with a chance for success. You were like a conscriptor working against Maldor. Without you the quest for the Word would not have been revived, and Rachel would have only associated briefly with Galloran. Nedwin would have never located his master. Tark would have never joined the cause. Nor Drake. Nor Aram. Nor Ferrin.*

*From across time I searched far and wide for a champion to rescue Lyrian. I had to search beyond our boundaries. Of any I could lure here, only you made victory possible. Both your direct actions and your indirect influence were necessary to give the free people of Lyrian a chance to avoid*

*the tyranny of Maldor. Do not doubt your worthiness. Without you, in every scenario I examined, victory stayed entirely out of reach.*

*It remains to be seen whether all the rebels you united will play their parts as well as you have played yours. As you read this, victory remains possible, although by no means certain.*

*You came here for knowledge. The information I have for you will not assure victory. But it will make victory possible.*

*I helped steer the prophecies that brought you here. The oracle Esmira lacked the talent to upset Maldor's aspirations. I mean no insult to her gift. Even to me the problem appeared nigh insurmountable, and in the end our combined efforts might fail. For the good of Lyrian I reached out to Esmira from across the ages and helped guide her visions. We communed most clearly at the end of her life. I could not show her all she needed to know, but I was able to convey enough to point Galloran in the proper direction and to direct you here to discover the rest.*

*There are occasions when knowledge proves more powerful than physical might. Maldor commands with Edomic more potently than I, and his armies vastly outnumber the host Galloran has assembled. But one secret from the past can give Galloran the advantage he needs. The secret is ancient even in my time. I learned it by looking back, not forward. The message you must share with Galloran is that the mount where Felrook now rests was once known by another name. In ages past it was called Mount Allowat.*

Jason paused. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but he could not place where he had heard it.

*This knowledge may baffle you at present, but Galloran will surely grasp the relevance. Let us hope for the sake of Lyrian that it will help him achieve victory.*

*I have a second message for you to relay. It pertains to your past, and my future. Again it is not a clue that you will decipher, but it may be of service to another. The message is for Rachel. It may save lives and spare you some grief. Tell her that Orruck already taught her all she needs to know. The former apprentice of Maldor meant to turn her into a weapon, and he shared a certain command he had crafted back when he aspired to overthrow Zokar. The command might serve her well in an hour of need.*

*These two messages are what you came to learn. Do not bother with the eagles. If the ear of the displacer does not suffice, the cause is already lost.*

*I have a final prophetic suggestion for you, Jason. This last message will only become relevant if you succeed and thwart Maldor. Lyrian will face many future dangers. You and Rachel came here from the Beyond. At the appointed time, for the good of Lyrian, one of you must return home, and one must stay. If you both stay, or if you both go, Lyrian will eventually fall.*

*That concludes the information I have to share. Never return here, Jason. There are no additional messages for you. Come again and you will die. To exit, press the round red jewel near the top of my throne.*

*Should Maldor fall, if your daughter ever has need of me, you may inform her that a prophecy awaits. Now speak to the ear and rejoin your friends.*

*From ages ago I bid you a fond farewell and wish you a bright future.*

*Your humble servant,*

*Darian*

Jason could hardly see through his tears. He felt relieved to know how he had contributed, but he also felt torn about Drake, who he had personally involved and who had died as a consequence. Would others he had involved die as well? Had others died already? He felt relieved to have information to share with his friends, even though he didn't understand how it would help. And he wasn't sure how he felt about staying forever in Lyrian. If he was going to have a daughter here, he had to be the one to stay, right? Or was the daughter just one of the many possible futures?

After getting his emotions under control, Jason looked around the lifeless room, half surprised to find himself still alone. He had not felt lonely while reading. He had almost felt as if Darian were here with him. Technically, he was, Jason realized, gazing across the room at the casket.

Jason dug into his pack. He pulled out a little case bundled in rags. Pulling apart the rags, he opened the case and withdrew an ear wrapped in linen. Jason unwrapped the ear and held it to his lips.

"Ferrin," he said loudly, spreading the scroll in front of him so he could use it as a reference, "if you are asleep, wake up. If you're busy, stop to listen. Ferrin, I have the prophecy. It came straight from Darian, just like the oracle promised. We'll send the eagles as well, but you should bring it straight to Galloran. Please

be true. Please don't betray us. Most of us died to get here. Corinne, Aram, and I are the only ones left. Farfalee might have lost her seed. We had to kill Groddic, who turned out to be the Wanderer.

"I'm rambling. Let me give you the message. I'm not totally sure what it means, but the mountain that Felrook is on was once called Mount Allowat. Darian thought that would be important. Also, he had a message for Rachel. Orruck already taught her what she needs to know. I guess it has to do with one of the Edomic commands he shared with her. It was something he invented to harm Zokar. That's all I was told. I hope it makes sense to you guys. I'll repeat the message again in a few minutes. I hope the battle is going well."

There was no way for Jason to confirm whether Ferrin had heard, but he intended to repeat and repeat and repeat to be sure. The ear felt warm and was not bleeding, so he knew the connection remained intact and Ferrin was alive. According to Darian, all their hopes now rested with the displacer.

# THE LAST WIZARD

Rachel waited for hours in the room where the torivor had left her. The lurker had delivered her through the window after scaling a high wall. She had been braced for a swift introduction to Maldor, but instead she had been admitted to Felrook without any formal greeting.

The room was comfortable, with a generous bed, rich carpets, an impressive desk, multiple chairs, a wardrobe, a bookshelf, and a table in the corner complete with a covered tray of food. There was a separate room for bathing, and beyond that a water closet. But the locked door was solid iron, and the window had no ledge. No matter how comfortable, the room was a prison.

After nightfall Rachel had used Edomic to light some of the candles and lamps around the room. She ate all of the food on the table and was especially grateful for the fresh fruit. Opening her window, she looked out at the night. The view felt like she was gazing from a mountaintop, easily the highest point in the valley. Cool air swished into her room. She was in no mood to sleep.

Io was dead. The pain and guilt of it stewed deep inside. Not only had she probably made a massive mistake by accepting the invitation to train with Maldor, but she had gotten Io killed in the process. She had not known Maldor would send armed lurkers. And she hadn't known Io would leap immediately to her defense against unbeatable foes. But even so, his death had been a direct result of her choice.

Rachel tried to shift the awful blame from herself to Maldor. The emperor had made her choice necessary in the first place. Without him none of this would be happening. He had sent the lurkers while she was with others instead of when she was alone. After what had happened to Drake, Rachel could not have imagined how she could hate Maldor any more, but somehow she was finding a way.

When the iron door opened, Rachel started, almost dropping her glass as she filled it with water from a pitcher. She had heard no footsteps to announce the visitor. Steadying herself, she took a sip and set the glass down.

A tall, spare man with close-set eyes and a narrow face waited in the doorway. He wore black robes overtopped by a gray mantle. Several guards stood behind him. "Good, you're awake. His Excellency will see you now."

"Is that an invitation or an order?" Rachel asked.

The man gave a faint shrug. "An invitation first."

Mustering her will, Rachel wanted to order the officious man onto the floor. She could do it. Then she could give the guards distracting commands and race past them. But race where? She would be wiser to form a plan before she revealed all she could do with Edomic.

"Fine," Rachel said, putting on her hat. She had held it tightly while riding the torivor. Now she arranged the veil to hide her face.

"Come with me," the man invited.

"Who are you?" Rachel asked as she stepped out into the hall.

"A servant of little import," the stranger replied. "An administrator of sorts. I am called Damak."

"I know your name," Rachel said. "You questioned Jason. You're Copernum's grandfather."

"I serve Maldor according to my talents," Damak replied. "Perhaps one day I will serve you as well. But not today."

He led her down some steps, through guarded doors, along a hall, through another set of guarded doors, and around a couple of corners. Then they reached an iron door at the end of a hall. Damak used a key to open it.

"I have the girl," he announced.

"Send her in," a voice replied. Rachel recognized the voice from her dream, although it sounded a bit more ragged. "Alone. Wait without."

"As you wish," Damak replied. He motioned Rachel through the door, then closed it behind her.

Sumptuously furnished, the spacious apartment was gloomy. All the curtains were drawn. Scattered candles provided pockets of light. Her veil further darkened everything, but she kept it in place. A figure stirred in a cushioned chair across the room. Blankets covered the slumped form.

"Come closer," Maldor beckoned. "Let me have a look at you."

Rachel stepped toward the speaker.

"Close enough," he said as she drew near his chair. "Turn around."

She obeyed, rotating once.

"I approve of your apparel," Maldor said. "Image matters more than many appreciate. I will have similar outfits tailored. Remove the veil."



Rachel took off the entire hat, setting it on a dark-red sofa. Maldor leaned forward into the candlelight. She gasped. His features were the same as in her dream, but he looked ill. His skin was pale with a clammy sheen, his hair greasy, his face deeply lined, his eyes bloodshot, one more than the other. Pink drool leaked from one side of his mouth. Half of his face sagged limply, as if paralyzed.

“You find me alarming,” Maldor said. Not all of his mouth moved when he spoke.

“You look sick.”

“I suppose I must. Thank you for coming, Rachel.”

“It seemed to be my only choice,” she replied.

Maldor coughed several times into his fist. He held up a finger to indicate he would respond in a moment. After the fit ended, he dabbed his lips with a handkerchief. It came away bloody. He cleared his throat. “It was your only reasonable choice. You could have elected to die with your friends.”

“Your lurkers killed one of my friends,” Rachel accused.

“How unfortunate,” Maldor said without conviction. “You asked for safe passage to Felrook. Your message was received by my torivors and relayed to me. I assessed the situation and dispatched an appropriate escort. It required no small effort, but I knew that there might be some who would intervene, regardless of what you desired. Please, sit down.”

Rachel sat on the sofa beside her hat. Had she done that voluntarily, or had there been a suggestion buried in his request?

“Normally, I would not let anyone see me in this state,” Maldor said. “As I mentioned a moment ago, image is important. But you are not just anyone. We must have an honest relationship. I want you as my pupil, Rachel. I want you as my apprentice, perhaps even one day as my friend. I want to witness the heights to which you will rise. I chose to let you see me like this so that you could behold the price I was willing to pay to bring you here.”

“You’re not sick,” Rachel realized. “Sending the lurkers did this to you.”

“Correct,” Maldor said, one hand straying to the dark jewel in the pendant around his neck. “I am already recovering. I was in much worse condition scant hours ago. I summoned you as soon as I felt I could hold a conversation. All of this will heal.” He gestured at his face. “The numbness is temporary. I almost overreached. I do not intend to send out five torivors bearing swords ever again. You understand why I did it?”

“To make sure nobody stopped me from coming?”

“Exactly. To ensure you reached me. This conflict is over. I do not need to slay you or Galloran or Ferrin to win this war. The war ended the day Galloran marched his army through the pass. But with my armies poised to descend, I had to get you out of that keep before the opportunity vanished. You almost waited too long to make your choice. I do not relish injuring myself. I do not delight in straining my relationship with the torivors. I do not enjoy freeing five of my finest servants from their obligations with only one of them having claimed a life.”

“They’re all free?” Rachel asked.

“All five. That is the price for sending them out with swords. And they needed swords. Had they been unarmed, Galloran might have cut down all of them. Had they failed in their mission, it would be one thing. I can accept losing a torivor if it is defeated. But I commanded them to stand down if you agreed to come here. I harmed my health and lost five of my elite to bring you to me. And I would have done more.”

“Why do you care so much?” Rachel asked. “You can’t possibly trust me.”

“Indeed?” he chuckled. “Trust has never been my habit. I have seen too many great wizards fall because they trusted apprentices.”

“Then why do you want me? As a slave?”

Maldor chuckled again. It grew into a cough. “I need no more servants. I have plenty. All of Lyrian. I will install safeguards much more reliable than trust. You will be my apprentice. I only ask that you learn from me.”

“What if I don’t want to learn from you?”

He smiled with the side of his lips that worked. “I realize that you do not wish to become like me. But I know you want to learn more about Edomic. You do recall that I visited your mind. I am the last wizard in Lyrian, Rachel. None remain who can teach you the secrets of our order. You cannot begin to imagine the possibilities.”

“If I work hard, maybe someday I can cough up blood too.”

“I understand your hostility. I am not a pleasant adversary. Unfortunately, when you came to this world, you became involved with the losing cause.”

“We haven’t lost yet,” Rachel said.

Maldor chortled. “Of course not. The prophecy! I had almost forgotten. Surely you realize that the prophecy allowed me to plan the perfect trap. I knew where my enemies were going, and I strategized accordingly. The prophecy only hastened their demise.”

“We haven’t lost yet,” Rachel repeated.

“They have. Not all of them are dead yet, but they have lost. You haven’t. You earned one last chance. Rachel, at this point hope becomes salt in the wound. You would be wiser to let go. I dispatched my finest servant to stop Jason and his friends. There will be no quarter given. They will all be killed. The tactic lacks subtlety, but at this juncture it is the prudent course. This servant never fails, Rachel. He is the same individual who brought me Galloran. In all probability Jason and those who accompanied him are already dead.”

“But you’re not sure,” Rachel said.

“Not yet. I will be soon. Obviously, Galloran and the others will perish at my leisure.”

“Don’t I get to spare ten of them?” Rachel asked.

Maldor paused. “That was the initial agreement. I never canceled the bargain. Very well. Prepare a list, and I will honor it to the best of my abilities. You understand that the blame for any of your comrades who are already dead because you took so long cannot be placed on me.”

“I’ll blame you as much as I want,” Rachel said. “You killed Drake.”

He held up a finger. “I meant to kill Jason. Drake died because he intervened.”

“You disgust me.”

“Do not test me, Rachel,” Maldor warned. “I find your raw Edomic talent intriguing. Partly through my doing, it has become a scarce commodity. But you are far from essential. I have been lenient today because I am aware that this transition will be difficult for you. You need to remember that the apprentice does not disparage the master.”

Fuming silently, Rachel held her tongue. If she seemed too defiant, it might be even more obvious that she had come here hoping to open Felrook to an attack.

“I’m glad to see you have some restraint,” Maldor said. “A little is better than none.”

“How will this work?” Rachel asked.

“Our arrangement? Do not fret about that until after your friends fall. I assume you came here still hoping to aid Galloran in some way. Foolish, but predictable given your history.”

Rachel frowned. Had he read her mind? Or was it really so obvious? “Why would you be here alone with me if you thought that?”

Maldor smirked lopsidedly. “You ask as if you could possibly pose a threat to me while I am conscious. Are you really that arrogant? Or perhaps just

ignorant?”

Rachel felt her cheeks growing hot.

“Rachel, I don’t worry about the threat you pose today. I don’t worry about the threat you will pose next year. You have talent, but you are barely a sapling. One day, after decades of training, if you reach your full potential, you could pose a threat, which is why safeguards will be installed at the outset. If you were a threat to me now, I would have little right to take you as an apprentice.”

Rachel nodded woodenly. Was he really so superior? Or was he trying to con her? Maybe he underestimated her. She couldn’t wait years to challenge him. Galloran had less than three days. Would she get another chance like this? One on one, with Maldor weakened from sending out torivors? Here he sat, leering crookedly and coughing like a weak old man. If she meant to take action against him, this could be her best and only chance.

Maldor wiped his lips. “You really are a stranger here in this world. You do not appreciate who I am. Perhaps that is for the best. Insulting to a degree, but also strangely refreshing. As our relationship progresses, I will share with you some of my abilities, to establish primacy. You should not have to serve as my apprentice while doubting my prowess.”

Rachel looked around the room. Her attention focused on a sheathed dagger resting on an end table. They were alone, Maldor seemed totally off his guard, and she would probably never find him in a weaker state. Speaking a command, Rachel unsheathed the blade; then, pouring all her fear and frustration into the directive, she drove it toward the form bundled on the chair.

Maldor mumbled words, and the dagger curved away from him, stopping with the point less than an inch from Rachel’s throat. How had he done that? She had pushed hard enough to send that knife through Maldor and the chair behind him, yet it had completely slipped from her mental grasp. Motionless, she stared at it, sweat beading on her brow. Speaking in silence, Rachel tried to grab the knife with her mind, but it felt more slippery than a living thing.

“It will take more than that,” Maldor said, letting the dagger fall. “However inept, that was unwise.”

Angry and embarrassed, Rachel ordered his chair ablaze, throwing everything she had into the effort. Flames would erupt all around him. Both chair and occupant would swiftly be reduced to cinders. Maldor muttered a brief phrase, canceling her command. The gathering heat dispersed, and Rachel fell to the floor, her body shuddering uncontrollably. As the seizure subsided, Rachel was left with a queasy stomach and a blinding pain behind her eyes. She knew that

Maldor had not directly afflicted her with any of the symptoms. They were the consequences of her failed Edomic mandate.

“Fire is more easily quenched than summoned,” Maldor instructed. “You leave yourself extremely vulnerable if you try to call fire in the presence of another wizard. Would you care to attempt another attack? You are looking unwell, Rachel. As much as my misery would enjoy the company, perhaps you should yield.”

Rachel fought to her feet. Her head was pounding. Her good judgment warned that he was clearly her superior. To attack again would only give him another opportunity to harm her. But she could not surrender. Her friends were counting on her to be strong.

In Edomic she suggested that Maldor fall to the floor. He flinched forward and then tensed for a moment, lips trembling, bloodshot eyes furious. After an instant he relaxed and began growling suggestions of his own. Rachel found herself picking up the fallen dagger and holding the tip to her throat. He kept talking. Rachel tried to resist his suggestions, but the words were making her hazy. She found herself sitting down on the sofa and pricking both of her thighs with the dagger and then plunging it into a cushion beside her. None of the actions had been her decision. Nobody at Mianamon had ever been able to make her feel this helpless. She was little more than a puppet. Maldor stopped talking, and she sagged back against the sofa, breathing hard, dizzy. Her skull felt fragmented. Her ears ached deep inside.

“How dare you seek to control a will such as mine?” Maldor spat, real anger coloring his tone for the first time. “Attempt it again, and I will open your throat for such insolence.”

Rachel heard him as if from far away. It was almost impossible to focus on anything but the pain flashing through her skull and raking the backs of her eyes. Dimly she grasped that Maldor was so outraged because her suggestion had momentarily worked. For one tiny instant, a period no longer than the space between heartbeats, he had almost obeyed. Only with real effort had he resisted. And he had not liked that at all.

“I can see that you are in no condition for further conversation,” Maldor continued. “Allow me to briefly explain the terms of your apprenticeship. Whether to test me or to flaunt your inability, you have shown yourself capable of treason. As insurance against further treachery, I will give you the eye and the ear of trusted displacers and bind a key word to you that will enable me to destroy you at my leisure. I believe you are familiar with the concept. By coming

here you have already accepted this apprenticeship and the attending safeguards.

“At present you require rest. I want you healthy in time to watch my armies crush the pitiful allies you brought into my valley. I may deem that the pain incidental to your failed assassination is punishment enough. Or I may decide otherwise. Either way I will have my servants prepare a concoction that will hasten your recovery. For now you have my permission to sleep.”

Maldor uttered a brief Edomic suggestion, and consciousness fled.

# DESTINY

Staring from the window of his room at East Keep, Tark contemplated the virtues of a singlehanded assault against Felrook. Beneath a sickle moon, pale highlights gleamed on the black stone of the fortress, making it appear only half-substantial in the darkness, a ghostly blend of light and shadow.

Tark gripped the windowsill. His hands were large and strong for his stature. He felt the edges of the masonry digging into his calloused fingers. How would he mount his solitary assault? Paddle across the lake, cloaked in darkness? Quietly scale the cliffs and then the wall? Or would it be more honest to charge up the path in broad daylight? After all, the point was to die.

He bowed his head, reliving Rachel's abduction in his mind. Lord Jason had charged him to protect her. Io had fallen defending her. Even the displacer had risked his life. But at a word from the girl Tark had stood aside and let the lurker bear her away. *She* had protected *him*! It was supposed to be the other way around!

Shame curdled in his gut. It was a disturbingly familiar sensation. He didn't deserve a clean death. He could have had one many times. Plenty had been offered. He might have had a good death if he had gone off the waterfall with his companions. He would have earned a noble death if he had continued to fight Maldor rather than accept an invitation to Harthenham. It would have been a worthwhile death to go back for Lord Jason at Harthenham. And it would have been a gallant death to perish defending Rachel as his lord had requested.

Tark had found reasons for running away every time. The waterfall had seemed pointless, as had his private war against Maldor. Dying alone at Harthenham had struck him as a more fitting end for a craven. But Jason had come. After Harthenham, Tark had needed to protect Jasher's seed. And then earlier today Rachel had ordered him to stand down. He would have had no chance of stopping the lurkers. Giving his life would have made no difference. Tark supposed that every coward had his reasons.

Back at Mianamon the oracle had assured him that he would have a role to play before this war was over. She had told him he would know when the time came. Well, the time had come, and he had let the opportunity pass him by. Maldor had claimed Rachel, and there was nothing he could do to change it, except perhaps to surrender his life in a hopeless attack.

Tark scowled. Would a hopeless assault against Felrook be a penitent act of courage or a wasteful display of self-pity? He would not be attacking. Not really. He would be abandoning his duty yet again. His duty to Galloran. Maldor's armies were coming. Jason had not only charged Tark to protect Rachel—he had also directed him to serve the king. Rachel had charged him with the same mission. If he had no hope of rescuing Rachel, he would be a better servant if he stayed and died beside Galloran.

A knock at his door startled Tark from his brooding. Who would be calling at this hour of the night? He heard no commotion outside the keep, no evidence of a sneak attack. Curious, Tark went to the door and opened it.

Ferrin stood there, looking dazed. "I thought you might be awake."

"What is it?" Tark wondered.

Ferrin gave half a smile and tapped the spot on the side of his head where his ear was missing. "I have news. I was on my way to Galloran, but I thought you might want to hear as well."

"News of Lord Jason?"

"He did it," Ferrin said simply. "He learned the prophecy. I had myself convinced that there was no way some words could repair this debacle, but Galloran was right. The information is everything that we were promised. It could enable us to destroy Felrook."

"What did Lord Jason learn?" Tark exclaimed.

Ferrin shook his head. "Galloran has earned the right to know first. But you deserve to be there."

Tark's mind whirled as he followed Ferrin toward Galloran's quarters. What could the information be? It must refer to a secret way into Felrook. If they could sneak their forces into the castle discreetly, the battle might be quick and decisive. They might rescue Rachel! When Maldor's armies arrived, they would find their leader dead or captured, with Galloran safely behind unassailable walls. Jason had learned of a secret entrance. What else could it be? What else would leave Ferrin proclaiming a possible victory?

Two seedmen, two drinlings, and two men of Trensicourt guarded the doors to Galloran's quarters.



“I have urgent tidings for the king,” Ferrin said with certainty.

The lead guard turned and knocked. Lodan answered, having replaced Io as Galloran’s assistant and bodyguard.

“Rouse the king,” Ferrin said. “We bear urgent tidings.”

“The king has not yet slept,” Lodan said. “He seems to have lost the knack. But he excels at pacing and at consulting maps. Come inside.”

“Not for a moment,” Ferrin replied. “Have the king put on his blindfold. My presence at this hour could provide hints.”

“As you will.” Lodan stepped away. A moment later he returned. “All right.”

Tark followed Ferrin through the open door. Lodan closed it, then followed Tark. Galloran faced them from across the room, still fully clothed, standing beside a table buried in maps. He had his blindfold in place.

“You are toying with my hopes,” Galloran said.

“Not toying,” Ferrin replied. “He did it. Jason told me the prophecy.”

“Will it help us?”

“It is a precious secret. We should limit those who hear it. If the secret becomes known, Maldor could counter us.”

“Yet you brought it to me,” Galloran said. “Thank you for your integrity. Who is with you? I heard another enter. Tark?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Tark said. “I could wait outside.”

“Nonsense. But not a word leaves this room. For now we keep it between the four of us. Let me be the judge of who else should know.”

“Two messages,” Ferrin said. “One is for you. It is the key to fixing all of this. Apparently, the other message could help Rachel. The message for you is that Felrook is built atop Mount Allowat.”

Galloran froze. Then he raised a hand to his lips, covering an irresistible smile. “The mountain where orantium was mined anciently.”

Ferrin nodded. “The mining was abandoned because they encountered a vein too large to extract. They sealed off the mine and kept the location a secret.”

“And millennia later,” Galloran murmured, “Maldor unwittingly built his fortress on top of it. Esmira saw true. Indeed, our hope is white, like a flash of orantium.”

“They must have sealed the mine with the lake,” Ferrin said. “Who knows what other precautions they took. Accessing the vein could be difficult.”

“We have tomorrow and the next day,” Galloran said. “The day after that, Maldor’s armies arrive. If we time this right . . .”

“. . . the war could end with a single blow,” Ferrin finished. “I should get to Lake Fellion at once. I can leave my nose above the water and search for the entrance to the lost mine.”

“Agreed,” Galloran said. “What of the message for Rachel?”

“Evidently, she learned what she needs to know from Orruck,” Ferrin said. “He taught her some words that could prove useful, a command he had developed to overthrow Zokar.”

“Orruck only taught her two commands,” Galloran said. “If Darian thinks they might be useful, we need to get her a message.”

“Telepathy?” Ferrin asked.

Galloran rubbed his chin. “She is inside the castle. If I were out on the water, I might be close enough to reach her. She needs to know that she must flee Felrook.”

“You can’t tell her how we mean to destroy the fortress,” Ferrin said.

“No,” Galloran agreed. “If Maldor somehow extracted that information from her, he might thwart us. We can warn her to escape, and give her a time frame. And we must tell her that the commands she learned from Orruck should prove useful. The rest will be up to her.”

“I should get to the lake,” Ferrin said.

“Right away,” Galloran agreed. “Bring seaweed. The glow will be visible, but you will need the light. Send out several boats, all with seaweed. It should confuse them. They will probably fire upon you.”

“I’m not terribly worried about that,” Ferrin said. “I should go.”

Tark grabbed Ferrin’s arm. “I can help. I was a diver. And a miner.”

“Right. Come on.”

Ferrin started to pull away, but Tark held him. “After we find the mine, somebody will have to start the explosion.”

“Yes,” Ferrin said. “It will not be the sort of task a man could possibly survive.”

Tark nodded, tears of relief shimmering in his eyes. “Since we set out from Mianamon, I’ve wondered why I was included. I don’t mean to sound pompous or selfish, but I can’t help suspecting . . . I think this might be my destiny.”

# JUSTICE

The castle was finally silent. Nedwin had waited long into the night, prowling the hidden passageways, listening to feet walking, armor jangling, clothes rustling, fire crackling, doors closing, locks clicking, liquid pouring, utensils clinking, lips smacking, and furniture creaking. He had caught fragments of hushed conversation and heard muffled giggles. He had listened to a woman humming an infant to sleep. But eventually the fires had burned low and stopped snapping, the quietest discussions had ceased, and people had quit haunting the corridors.

There would be guards posted at certain doors, and many sentries out walking the walls, but the halls of the castle were as deserted as they would ever get. Soft snores and skittering mice were the loudest exceptions to the silence. In another hour the kitchens would revive as bakers got an early start on fresh bread, but until then the castle belonged to whoever could furtively claim it.

The target he had chosen for tonight was not a matter of vengeance. After weighing his options for days, Nedwin had concluded that his decision to pay Copernum a visit was not driven by personal prejudice. It was an important step toward reclaiming Trensicourt. It was a matter of justice.

Galloran had treated Copernum with leniency. And how had Copernum repaid the undeserved mercy? With treason. He had stolen the kingdom while his king was away. He had murdered good men in the night. He had openly claimed Trensicourt for the emperor.

Copernum had not even tried to conceal his crime. By announcing it publicly, in essence he had confessed to high treason. The punishment for treason was execution.

Despite his many unsavory characteristics, Copernum was an excellent strategist. While he survived, Trensicourt would be much more difficult to reclaim. The usurpers already lacked their giants. Without Copernum's leadership, the false government would be significantly more vulnerable.

It would not be easy to reach him. Copernum had abandoned his former rooms and claimed the royal residence as his own. Nedwin knew of no secret ways into the royal tower. If Galloran were familiar with any, he had kept the knowledge to himself. In the interest of making the tower secure, it was possible that no such passages existed.

But long ago Nedwin had noticed a single vulnerability. A certain balcony was theoretically accessible from a particular window across the way. Nedwin had never been able to avoid noticing such things. Taking advantage of the vulnerability would require skill, and a little luck. Nedwin felt sure he could do it.

There was another option, much less subtle. Nedwin knew where to find the stash of twelve orantium globes. With liberal use of the spheres he could probably blast his way through doors and guards quickly enough to reach Copernum. But Nedwin knew that if he entered with orantium, he would never escape. The commotion would rouse too many guards.

Nedwin wanted to survive. There would be many other targets besides the giants and Copernum. The deceitful chancellor had started a dishonorable war, a sneaky war, the kind of war without banners or trumpets, a quiet war waged in the darkest hours of the night, and Nedwin was uniquely suited to this form of combat.

Galloran would not want him to throw his life away. How could Nedwin keep serving the king and his causes if he let the guards cut him down? The other men still loyal to Galloran needed his leadership and expertise. He would enter quietly, claim Copernum, and escape to fight another day.

The castle remained still. The hour to act had come.

Nedwin passed into an empty room through a hidden panel. He wore moccasins and quiet black clothes. Stealth was his armor. He wore a short sword nearly broad enough to pass as a cleaver. The heavy blade would serve well for tonight's errand.

Listening carefully, Nedwin hurried down a hall and then climbed a winding stair. He reached the desired door, a monstrosity of wood and iron. With slender tools he coaxed the lock. The resultant click boomed like a gong to his ears. He held still, senses straining. The sleeper within breathed evenly.

After putting the tools away, Nedwin produced a handkerchief. Among the vials around his neck he found the desired solution, and he dampened the cloth. He eased the door open and strode to the bed. A stocky man in his fifties lay on his side. He had bushy eyebrows and black hair poking from his ear.

Nedwin firmly placed the handkerchief over the sleeper's nose and mouth. The man gasped, shuddered, and fell still, his breathing slower than before. His eyelids had squeezed but never opened. He would not wake until late in the afternoon.

After pocketing the handkerchief, Nedwin shut and locked the door. Pulling a rope and grapnel from his pack, he crossed to the window. Using tools belonging to Nicholas, Nedwin had fashioned the grapnel himself for this very purpose, sizing it to grasp the desired balustrade. His life would depend on it.

Setting the grapnel aside for a moment, Nedwin checked his three crossbows—two small, one large—all excellent weapons designed and crafted by Nicholas and his niece. He knew from experience that the small bows would fling their quarrels with astonishing velocity for their size. The larger bow could be fired twice, as it held a pair of quarrels. All three bows were loaded and ready. He strapped them into handy positions on his body. If a shot was not fatal, the substance on the tips of the quarrels would leave a man unconscious in seconds.

Opening the window, Nedwin gazed at the balcony of the royal tower, above him and separated by a wide gap of empty space. Too high to reach from the ground, the balcony was only available from this solitary window. Leaning out, Nedwin could see the kennels.

He took a deep, steadying breath. He would have to be quick. He had no room for error. There was no guard on the balcony, but at least two awaited inside. The balcony was three floors below Copernum. If he failed to dispatch the guards silently, the endeavor would fail. If the guards reached the balcony before him, he was a dead man.

This maneuver was risky. It was by far the greatest risk he would take tonight, the price he had to pay for access to a very cautious man. Hefting a crossbow, Nedwin aimed at the kennels and fired. Out and down the quarrel flew, finally thumping against wood.

As he desired, the dogs started barking. Grapnel in hand, Nedwin climbed onto the windowsill. The barking dogs might offer some cover for the upcoming clamor. Nedwin threw the grapnel and leaped from the ledge before knowing whether it would catch.

As Nedwin fell through the darkness, the grapnel pulled the rope higher, using up the slack. He took solace that the throw had felt true. Somewhere above him the grapnel clanged against the balcony. Even masked by the barking dogs, the noise of the grapnel seemed to rival an orantium blast. The rope jerked taut as the metal claw took hold of the balustrade.

Instead of free-falling, Nedwin was now swinging toward the tower. The balcony projected far enough that he had some upswing before reaching the wall. Nedwin extended his legs to absorb the impact. It felt like he had jumped off a roof but had landed well. As he swung back away from the wall, he was already climbing.

The grappling hook had a good grip. He had kept hold of the rope. He had not fallen and splattered against the paving stones of the courtyard more than fifty feet below. Now it was a race.

Hand over hand he ascended—long smooth pulls. For his height he was not a heavy man, and his gangly arms had more strength in them than some might expect. Few men could climb a rope faster. But would he reach the top fast enough?

Nedwin heard the door to the balcony open. He could not panic. He was almost there. Hurried footsteps approached the end of the balcony. The guard had clearly seen the grapnel and was rushing to investigate. He had not called out a warning. Nedwin had five more feet to go. From the sound of the footsteps, the guard would reach the grappling hook just before Nedwin reached the top. If the guard kicked the grapnel, Nedwin would die. If the guard looked over the edge, he might have a chance.

When the guard looked over the edge, Nedwin reached up, grasped him by the collar, and yanked with everything he had. The unprepared guardsman came over the railing and plunged headfirst to the courtyard. He did not cry out, but he landed loudly. The dogs barked with renewed vigor.

With a small crossbow ready, Nedwin climbed over the balustrade. The door stood open. He heard another man coming. The instant the guard appeared, he received a quarrel in his heart from ten feet away. Nedwin closed the distance and covered the man's mouth as he slumped into oblivion.

His next crossbow ready, Nedwin entered the room. No other guards presented themselves. He knew the layout and quickly confirmed that no other soldiers were stationed on this floor of the apartment. He listened. There would be guards outside the main door to this room. There would probably be a guard or two immediately outside of Copernum's bedroom door. In spite of this, Nedwin heard nobody responding.

He had to hurry. If anyone tried to check in with the guards he had eliminated, his cover would be blown. He raced to the fireplace, where embers glowed at the hearts of charred logs.

The chimney extended down to other levels, but layers of iron bars had been inserted below this point to forbid access. The last time Nedwin had checked, no bars prevented upward access from here. This floor was part of the royal residence.

Ducking into the warm fireplace, Nedwin climbed. Copernum had once sent an assassin to kill Jason. The assassin had accessed his room through the fireplace. Nedwin could not help smiling as he reached the royal bedchamber.

Copernum was asleep. Nedwin could hear him breathing. Listening intently, he detected nobody else in the room. Avoiding embers, Nedwin crept silently from the enormous fireplace.

Alarms would sound when the dead guard was discovered in the courtyard. The yowling dogs could summon alert eyes to the scene at any moment. A million other factors could lead to the discovery of his intrusion. He did not have much time.

On light feet, by the faint glow from the fireplace, Nedwin crossed to the bed. His hair mussed, Copernum slept with his mouth open. His neck looked scrawny. A strong blow from the short sword might cut all the way through.

Copernum had personally tortured Nedwin throughout the final years of his incarceration. The chancellor had experimented with nervesong much more than any of the other torturers, lifting Nedwin to excruciating plateaus of agony. Nedwin frequently relived those experiences in his nightmares. Last night, in fact, Copernum had supervised the festivities.

Nedwin had dreamed of giving Copernum a dose of nervesong. He carried some in one of the vials around his neck. He had fantasized about letting his tormentor sample the anguish he had administered so liberally.

But tonight was not about vengeance. Tonight was about justice. Any extra time he took might get him caught. Nedwin did not belong to himself. He belonged to Galloran.

Nedwin did not need Copernum to know who was dealing the death blow. Nedwin did not need to see the recognition and terror in his eyes. It was enough to anonymously bring the traitor to justice. One swift stroke. A more merciful death than Copernum deserved. But it would suffice.

Nedwin drew the sword. It rasped faintly while escaping from the sheath. Copernum mumbled and shifted slightly. Nedwin raised the weapon high and brought it down hard.

The sharp blade sliced through the scrawny neck. Nedwin did not pause to relish the success. It was simply a mission accomplished. He moved away from

the bed, back toward the fireplace. But then he paused.

The sword was sharp and heavy. Almost a cleaver. And Copernum had a skinny neck. But the neck had bones and muscle and tendons. The blade had cut through too cleanly. And why had there been no blood?

When Nedwin turned back, the body was leaning over the far side of the bed. There was still no blood. The severed head remained on the pillow, glaring at him. It was not an expression that had frozen on the face at the moment of the execution. The traitor was clearly still alive.

Copernum was a displacer! No wonder the head had separated so neatly! The knowledge stunned Nedwin. The secret had been kept perfectly. Yet there was the proof, a decapitated head that clearly remained alert.

Raising his short sword again, Nedwin charged the bed. The headless body turned, lunged, and plunged a sword into him. Nedwin staggered back, falling to the floor. Copernum must have kept the sword by his bedside. There was no mistaking that the wound was fatal. It didn't hurt, but he was going to die.

The body reclaimed the head, and Copernum came to stand over him, his eyes narrow. "That was very foolish, Nedwin." He rubbed his neck. "You could have injured me. Fortunately, I have a few secrets. It will take a better man than you to claim my life. Revenge is an ugly business, Nedwin, as you are aptly demonstrating."

"Justice," Nedwin managed. At any moment he would pass out. He clung to his awareness.

"Justice, you say? Yes, you learned much about the emperor's justice at my hands. I would love to give you another taste of justice. Or why just a taste, when we could have a feast? We used to have such times, the two of us."

Hands trembling, Nedwin produced a vial from around his neck. He swiftly uncapped it, raised it to his lips, and upended it, swallowing the contents.

"No need to poison yourself," Copernum chuckled. "You have escaped me. Your wound is plainly lethal. This time death will have to be justice enough. It would have been more entertaining to take you alive, but I can still make an example of you."

Nedwin tried to reply, but his voice would not cooperate. There was still no pain, but his vision was dimming, and he could hardly breathe. Copernum continued to talk, the words unintelligible, like a low conversation heard through a thick door. An irrelevant conversation, Nedwin realized. He had failed. He closed his eyes. No! What if he got up? What if he found the strength to pull the sword from his body? What if he used it to strike down the traitor?



Maybe Copernum would finally stop talking. The man had always talked too much, especially during torture.

Nedwin tried to sit up. He could not even raise his head! He tried to swallow, but his throat was not working. He could not open his eyes. He seemed disconnected from his body. Where was he? Oh, yes. The royal bedchamber. He had failed. He was dying. So this was what it felt like. He wondered what would come next. While Copernum droned on, he painlessly slipped away.

## A PRUDENT PRECAUTION

Tark trudged toward his tent, a steaming bowl of stew cradled in one arm. No longer stationed inside East Keep, he now slept near the shore of Lake Fellion with Ferrin and several others who had worked around the clock to learn the secrets of the lost mine hidden below the water.

After entering his makeshift home, Tark sat and blew across the surface of his stew. He dipped his spoon and tried a tentative sip. It would not do for him to burn his tongue and ruin the taste of his final supper. With the armies of Maldor poised to arrive sometime tomorrow, the cook had included extra meat, vegetables, and seasonings.

Most men who understood anything about the coming battle believed that tonight would be their last. They had no idea that tomorrow morning Galloran would initiate a massive retreat. If Tark succeeded in his task, most of the host Galloran had assembled should survive.

Tark sipped the salty broth. Whether he succeeded or failed in the mine tomorrow, he would not see another sunset. He had paused to ponder that thought on the way to his tent, gazing westward, appreciating the red highlights on the distant clouds as seldom before.

The exploration of the lake had succeeded. They knew where the mine was located. Ferrin had scouted it and given extensive details on where to find the sealed portion of the tunnels. All that remained was for Tark to follow the instructions, unseal the closed section, and cause an explosion like Lyrian had never known.

His third bite of stew contained some meat and onion and required some chewing. He had tasted better stew, but not often. As his farewell supper it would suffice. How was he supposed to make up for all the meals he would never eat during a single sitting? The idea was ludicrous. It was enough to enjoy a simple stew while contemplating his upcoming assignment and all it would mean to so many.

He heard the conversation begin in the tent beside him without heeding the words. It was not common to overhear conversations in Ferrin's tent. Unless engaged in a scouting mission or a strategy session, the displacer kept to himself these days.

"I want an explanation" were the first words from Ferrin that made Tark start paying attention.

"Think it through," answered a voice. Was that Naman? "Everything hinges on this operation. Must I elaborate? We simply cannot afford the risk."

"You could afford the risk up until tonight?" Ferrin replied with incredulous contempt.

"Keep it down," Naman replied in a softer tone. "There is no need to cause a scene."

Tark set his stew aside and walked out of his tent. Less than ten paces away, six seedmen clad in light armor stood in front of Ferrin's tent. The seedmen did not seek to stop Tark as he crossed and entered.

Naman and Ferrin both looked over at the intrusion. Naman seemed mildly bothered, and Ferrin looked disgruntled. An additional pair of seedmen guards flanked Naman.

"What's going on?" Tark asked.

"Nothing you need fret over," Naman said. "We're just addressing some security concerns. You have a big day looming. Get some rest, Tark."

"Security concerns?" Tark asked, his eyes on Ferrin.

Ferrin met the stare with a neutral expression. "Now that I've supplied the location of the mines and scouted them, I'm being arrested."

"No need to make it sound so dramatic," Naman said uncomfortably. "It's just that you know exactly how to stop our secret offensive tomorrow. The high command of the Amar Kabal will sleep better knowing you are free from any temptation of honoring old loyalties."

"Your soldiers have kept a close watch on me throughout this process," Ferrin said. "Isn't that insulting enough? If I meant to defect, I could have done it long before now."

"But not with such vital information," Naman replied. "Invaluable information that could turn the tide of the war. Information that could earn you forgiveness from any past indiscretions. You have submitted to other measures to ensure your loyalty. We will release you after events play out tomorrow."

Ferrin shook his head. "I submitted to my friends. I submitted to Galloran. If he wants me with him tonight, I would oblige. But I do not sense his

involvement in this.”

“Galloran is trying to contact the girl again,” Naman said. “He has much on his mind. The logistics we will face tomorrow are intricate. It will be impossible to sufficiently prepare for all contingencies. There is no need to bring him into this.”

Ferrin reddened slightly. “There is considerable need. I did not betray my people for you. I did it for a select few, including Galloran. Keep away from me, Naman. Despite appearances, I remain a displacer. We have a long history with you seedfolk. I will not be made the prisoner of my enemies.”

Naman’s countenance darkened. “If you openly admit that you view us as enemies, the need to take you into custody is increased, not diminished. I had hoped to keep this civil. Tark, you may want to step outside.”

His expression unreadable, Ferrin looked to Tark.

“Is this really necessary?” Tark asked. “Ferrin has proven loyal. He could stay with me.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Naman said. “I know you have spent months as comrades, and you are right to show some loyalty. Ferrin has served all of us well. We mean him no harm. He will be comfortable. He will be released tomorrow as a friend of the Amar Kabal, the first displacer to receive such an honor. We are simply ensuring that he can be released as a hero.”

Ferrin fixed Naman with a level gaze. “If you arrest me this evening, do not ever call me a friend. It would be a greater insult than I could bear.”

“As you wish,” Naman replied stiffly. “Will you come quietly, or must we drag you from here piece by piece?”

Ferrin looked to Tark. “Make sure Galloran hears of this.” He turned his eyes back to Naman. “Or is Tark to be detained as well?”

“Tark’s allegiance is not in question,” Naman replied. “He is welcome to convey whatever information he likes to Galloran. I will stand by this decision before any authority in the land. It is a just and prudent precaution.”

“Take me with him,” Tark offered. “If Ferrin is to be held under guard, hold me alongside him.”

“No,” Ferrin said. “I would rather that news of my arrest reach Galloran. I’ll go quietly, Naman, though under protest.”

“Your protest is noted,” Naman said. He nodded to the two soldiers in the room, who moved forward, seized the displacer, and ushered him from the tent.

Tark followed. The seedmen outside formed up around Ferrin, marching him away.

“Make no mistake,” Tark heard Ferrin say, “the Amar Kabal have not made a friend tonight.”

Tark stood outside the tent in the fading twilight. It would do no good to seek out Galloran immediately. The king was on the water, and would be for the better part of an hour.

Returning to his tent, Tark found his soup still reasonably warm. The musician had never trusted Ferrin, but he disliked the decision to arrest him. Keep watch on him? Sure. But seizing him like this seemed a certain way to provoke him. Tark would definitely share the news with Galloran. Now that the seedmen had made their move, he hoped the Amar Kabal would keep the displacer under very close guard. Something about Ferrin’s brooding calm throughout the confrontation had left Tark feeling uncomfortable.

# TELEPATHY

Someone was calling to her. It was not the first attempt. He sounded far away. It was hard to focus on the words. The meaning escaped her. She would respond later. Right now she was too tired.

The petitioner persisted. Not loudly, but earnestly. The plea for her attention blended with her disjointed dreams, gaining and losing prominence. The voice was familiar. Some instinct insisted that she concentrate.

*Rachel, are you there? I know you can sense me. Rachel, you must heed me! Rachel, can you respond? Wake up, Rachel! Wake up!*

Rachel opened her eyes. It was Galloran, his mind calling to hers. Her room was dark. She was in bed. She sat up. She felt disoriented. Her mouth was dry and tasted horrible. She was at Felrook! She had tried to attack Maldor and failed! The vicious headache she had expected was almost nonexistent.

*Rachel. Respond to me, Rachel! I have vital news! Rachel?*

The fervent words tickled at the edge of her awareness, faint as the last bounce of an echo.

*Galloran?* she replied, putting some effort behind it.

*Rachel! I have sought to reach you for two days.*

*Two days? Where are you?*

*On the lake. I could perceive your mind, but you were not lucid.*

She was already feeling much more alert. *I'm so sorry about how I left! I thought I might be able to help from inside Felrook. I had no idea it could be dangerous for you guys.*

*I understand what you were attempting,* Galloran replied. *We were almost out of options. You were doing your best. It was an unfortunate tragedy. You must not blame yourself. He chose to attack. Wartime decisions inevitably lead to casualties.*

*I tried to attack Maldor, Rachel confessed. He was sick from sending the lurkers, and I hoped to surprise him. I never stood a chance. I tried my best and overexerted myself. I've been unconscious. Two days?*

*Yes. We have little time. Jason shared the prophecy with us.*

*Really?*

*The eastern armies are on schedule. They should arrive by midday tomorrow. Rachel, you must flee Felrook before then. You must get well away. If not you will die with . . . minions.*

*What? I missed part of that!* The communication was growing even less distinct. She got out of bed, her legs wobbly. Her mouth tasted disgusting. She padded to the window and opened it, gazing out at the calm evening. The last of the light was fading in the west.

*You must escape Felrook by tomorrow morning, Galloran repeated. Otherwise you will die beside Maldor and his minions. We have found a way to stop him. I cannot be more specific than that.*

*I'm not sure I can escape.*

*Darian the Seer had a message specifically for you. I think it is meant to help you survive. He wanted you to know that Orruck taught you—*

The voice in her head was gone. Rachel leaned out the window and exerted her will. *What? Galloran? I lost you again! What about Orruck?*

The words returned to her mind so faintly that she bowed her head, eyes closed, not daring to breathe. *Orruck taught you what you need to know. One of the commands Orruck imparted was developed by him to harm Zokar. The seer felt . . . useful.*

*Orruck taught me to call lightning, Rachel replied, unsure whether he could hear her. A massive burst of lightning. I've never tried it. And he taught me words to turn stone into glass. Do you think I need lightning?*

*Rachel?*

*I'm here! Do you think I need lightning?*

The voice in her mind grew stronger. *Lightning or the other command. Lightning is volatile. Plan an escape. Take any risk necessary. You must be gone by midday. Your life depends on it. Figure out how Orruck's commands might prove useful. Otherwise you die tomorrow. Come to me if you can. I will be in the western hills. I cannot sustain this communication. I apologize.*

*She could feel the strain behind his words. I heard. I'll do my best. Good luck.*

*Be brave. You can do this. I am counting on you to escape.*

*Is Jason all right?*

*He lives. The words were so weak, she wondered if she might have imagined them. Escape. I'll watch for you.*

The distant communication had evidently taxed Galloran to his limits. He would need his strength for whatever was happening tomorrow. *I got the message.*

*Go rest. Thank you.*

Rachel backed away from the window. She lit candles and lamps with Edomic. Her gentle headache felt like the result of sleeping too long rather than the punishing backlash of failed Edomic commands. The effort of will to ignite the candles did not seem to enhance the pain. Neither had the conversation with Galloran.

She stopped to wonder whether Maldor could have overheard the exchange. With mental communication she usually sensed only messages targeted at her. But Galloran sometimes picked up thoughts she didn't mean to send.

If Maldor had sensed their conversation, there was nothing she could do about it now. If he had that ability, or if the lurkers had used their abilities on his behalf, she would just have to hope that nobody was paying attention.

There were two pitchers on the table. One gave off a strong odor. The scent triggered memories. She had wakened several times to sip that pungent solution. Her recollection of those moments was hazy—her head and shoulders propped up by pillows, a cup offered by a gnarled hand, a taste like nutty egg yolks accented by a distinctly metallic tang. Sometimes the drink had been warm, other times room temperature. Unable to resist her weariness, she had always sunk right back to sleep.

How heavily had they drugged her? The agony she had begun to experience after challenging Maldor lingered only as a vague discomfort. But she had lost two days! She had intended to find some way to help Galloran from inside Felrook before the enemy armies arrived. Instead, she had spent the time in a stupor.

She could not rest any longer. The other pitcher smelled like water. She poured some into her cupped palm and splashed the liquid against her face. Then she filled a glass. Walking to the window, she swished around a mouthful and spat it out. Then Rachel gargled another two mouthfuls. The gargling reduced the hideous taste in her mouth. The foulness went beyond the nasty flavor of oversleeping. Some of the vileness had to be a consequence of the medicine.

Slowly sipping water, Rachel tried to decide what she should do. According to Galloran, she did not need to fret about winning the war from inside Felrook. Jason had come through. He had delivered the prophecy, and Galloran had learned some secret that would let him destroy the fortress. She just needed to worry about getting out.



But how could she do that? Maldor had proven much more powerful than her. Using all her strength while he was weakened, she hadn't managed to scratch him. Maybe she could slip out of the fortress with a series of Edomic suggestions. Working with Ferrin, she had learned how to pick locks. Was it possible that she could make it all the way out of Felrook by picking locks and nudging minds?

The prospect seemed unlikely. She would have to get past too many guards. She could distract a few temporarily with Edomic, but eventually they would catch on, and an alarm would be raised. Besides, what would prevent Maldor from sending a torivor to retrieve her?

Rachel rubbed her face with both hands. Despite her many worries, Jason had done his part. How did he keep succeeding against all odds? What would he do if he were trapped here? She had to think like him. She had to find a way.

Galloran now had the information he needed. It was terrific, surprising news, except that it meant coming here had been totally unnecessary. She should have had more faith in Jason and his mission. If she had just held on a couple days more before caving in to her fears . . .

Then again, Jason had received a specific message for her. Darian had provided a clue. Was it meant to reach her here? Could she still be within the boundaries of the prophecy? Or had that clue been meant to find her under other circumstances? Had she already blown it?

There was no rewriting history. She had made her decision with the information she'd had at the time. She had to accept her situation. Her focus needed to be on what she would do now.

If she discounted the clue from Jason, she would be adrift without a compass. She had to trust that the message pertained to her current situation. The secret of her escape must involve what Orruck had taught her. The former apprentice of Zokar had forced her to demonstrate her ability to push objects with Edomic. He had also taught her a command involving lightning and a command that could turn stone to glass.

Rachel had never attempted the lightning command. The phrasing would not allow the directive to be issued on a small scale. Galloran had warned that electric commands tended to be unstable. In ancient times, even the strongest wizards had generally avoided them.

But could that instability work to her advantage? Might Maldor struggle to counteract lightning? Or would he undermine the command as he had with fire, forcing Rachel to deal with the consequences of a failed mandate?

The electric command called for huge opposing charges that would produce the equivalent of a serious lightning strike. Such a powerful command could have been created to attack a mighty wizard. But the concept of commanding lightning had seemed familiar to Galloran, which implied that a lightning spell was not particularly unusual. Supposedly, Orruck had developed one of those commands to harm Zokar. If he had developed the command on his own, wouldn't it be unfamiliar? Or could he have authored a specific type of lightning command?

Galloran had never mentioned seeing a command turn stone to glass. But Rachel had never discussed that command much with him. She had successfully uttered the command numerous times. It had never seemed remarkably challenging or mysterious.

Could turning stone to glass be the command Orruck had developed? How could it have harmed Zokar? How could it harm Maldor?

Maldor was not made of stone. But Felrook was a different matter. Could Zokar have had a similar fortress? Turning the walls of Felrook to glass would certainly make the stronghold more vulnerable. Of course, to accomplish the feat a wizard would either need infinitely more power than Rachel possessed, or else a very long time to transform the fortress segment by segment.

How else might Maldor be vulnerable?

Rachel wished she understood more about the relationship between Maldor and the torivors. Controlling them took a heavy toll on him, which meant that they probably weren't willing servants.

What did she know about them? The lurkers were not native to Lyrian. They had been summoned from another world. The Myrkstone that Maldor wore was somehow involved with dominating them. Could she turn that to glass? Could she destroy it?

Was she foolish to imagine that the lurkers might help her if given the chance? When she had communicated with them, they had never felt evil. Alien, yes, but not hateful. If anything, they had seemed indifferent. They fulfilled their orders, but they did not seem to personally care about their assignments.

Folding her arms on the windowsill, Rachel rested her chin. How essential was she to all of this? Maybe she had already done her part by smashing the gate at West Keep. Did it matter if she escaped? At least if she died, it would mean Galloran had succeeded. That was better than total failure, right? Of course, living to enjoy the victory would be nice too.

Could Galloran really have found a way to win? The notion seemed impossible, but he was no fool, and Rachel had sensed no uncertainty behind his words.

The lock to her room rattled, and the door opened. Turning away from the window, Rachel beheld an old crone in a drab, hooded robe. A huge mole bulged near the corner of her eye. She appeared mildly surprised to find Rachel on her feet. A pair of uniformed guards stood behind her. "You woke early," the woman said, her voice tremulous with age. "How do you feel?"

Wanting to appear worse off than she felt, Rachel rubbed one temple. "Sore and dizzy. I wanted fresh air."

"You should lie down," the woman encouraged. She waved the guards back, and they shut the door.

Clutching her side and taking small steps, Rachel crossed to the bed. "I remember your hands," Rachel said truthfully. The knuckles were red and swollen, the nails dark and sharp like claws. "You've been tending me."

"I have," the woman replied. "You have rested fitfully. If you need more of the potion, I can provide it."

"I think I've slept long enough," Rachel said, sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed.

The woman tottered close and rested a palm against Rachel's forehead. Then the crone felt her cheeks, and her neck, and ran her fingertips from the back of her head down her spine. "More potion does not appear necessary. You have mostly recovered. It would be better for you to rest on your own."

"What is your name?" Rachel asked.

"Zuza," the woman replied with a small nod.

*Can you hear me, Zuza?* Rachel asked forcefully.

The woman hesitated. *I hear you, child.*

*I thought Maldor got rid of everyone with Edomic talent.*

*He spares a few of us as he sees fit. My ability is small. I make myself useful.*

*You're a healer?*

Yes.

"Maldor wants to train me," Rachel whispered.

"I am aware," Zuza replied.

*Where does he keep the torivors?* Rachel wondered. She studied the old woman for a response, her eyes and mind straining.

*What do you care about torivors?*

Rachel could sense no answer peripheral to the reply. She pushed to uncover hidden thoughts. *I need to speak with them.*

The old woman made a sound that was half laugh, half croak. *You would do well to keep away.*

*Do you love Maldor?* Rachel questioned.

*I love that he no longer tortures me,* Zuza answered. *I love that he lets me live. I help him recover when he is overspent.*

Rachel nodded. *I must speak with the torivors. I have my reasons.*

Zuza gave a derisive snort. *You must still be addled by the potion. You should lie down.*

*Where are they kept?* Rachel repeated.

*Can you not feel them, child? Their power is muted by their prison, but not entirely contained.*

Rachel searched with her mind. Zuza was right! As Rachel concentrated, she could vaguely sense them near, but it was hard to get a sense of direction. *Are they all around us?*

The woman shook her head. *You need much more experience before attempting to consort with the darklings. Put them far from your thoughts. If you continue to please him, Maldor will doubtless introduce you to them in time.*

Rachel closed her eyes, actively trying to identify where she felt the lurkers. Below her. Not directly below. She pointed a finger. Opening her eyes, she saw that she was pointing downward, away from the window.

Zuza looked where Rachel was pointing. *More or less.*

*Not far down,* Rachel conveyed. *Not down in the dungeons. Not too far from here.*

*Maldor likes to keep his pets close,* Zuza explained. *You are also near his quarters. You are better off near him than in the dungeons, you have my word on that. "You should get back in bed."*

*"I've slept long enough."*

*"Maybe you should consume more potion, sleep through another day. The additional respite may not be necessary, but it might do you some good. Tomorrow will not be pleasant out there."* Zuza inclined her head toward the window.

*How tight is his hold on the torivors?* Rachel asked.

*Tight enough,* Zuza responded.

*I need your robes,* Rachel conveyed.

*No,* Zuza told her firmly. *Do not make me call the guards.*

Rachel sighed and lowered her head. “Maybe I’ll have some of your potion after all.”

“Very prudent, my dear,” Zuza approved. She tottered over to the pitcher and poured the pungent fluid into a cup.

Rachel scooted back into bed. As Zuza shuffled toward her, Rachel issued an Edomic suggestion for the old woman to drink, pushing as hard as she dared. Zuza raised the cup to her lips and began swallowing. Rachel repeated the suggestion every few seconds. The old woman’s eyes grew wide with panic, but she kept drinking, thin streams of fluid running down the sides of her chin.

Rachel rolled out of bed and took the nearly empty cup from Zuza, and she forcefully suggested that she sleep. The old woman sagged so suddenly that Rachel dropped the cup and nearly dropped Zuza as well. With an effort Rachel scooped the woman up and dumped her on the bed.

Rachel stripped off the woman’s robes and arranged the covers so that Zuza could not be seen, reducing her to a vaguely humanoid lump. Rachel stashed her own clothes behind the bed and dressed in the hooded robes. She pulled the cowl as far forward as it would go, tucked her hands back into the sleeves, and tried to mimic Zuza’s hunched stance.

With Edomic words on her lips, Rachel rapped on the door. The lock clicked and the door opened. Rachel did not dare look the guards in the eyes. Instead, she shuffled from the room, head bowed, eyes on their boots.

“Back to sleep again?” one of the guards inquired, poking his head into the room.

Rachel nodded and gave an indistinct grunt.

“Off to your quarters, then,” another guard said, prodding Rachel.

“Why did you cover her head?” a third guard asked, stepping into the room.

Rachel shrugged with attempted nonchalance. There had been three guards, not two, waiting in the hall. The one who had entered the room was about to discover Zuza beneath the covers. One of the remaining guards held the keys. In Edomic, Rachel suggested that the guard hand her the keys, and then followed that up by suggesting the guards enter the room. She motioned through the doorway for emphasis.

The guard passed her the keys, and both strode through the doorway as if the idea had been their own. They paused after a few steps, but it was too late. Rachel hauled the heavy door shut.

Banging and yelling ensued. The protests were audible, but the iron door muffled the worst of the noise. Anyone happening by would hear the faint

commotion, but thankfully the protests were not carrying very far. The noise was less than ideal. She knew a command to induce sleep, but it only worked well if the subject was unaware and unoccupied. And she doubted whether she could have held control of all three guards for long enough to coax them into drinking the sleeping potion.

Rachel tried to calm herself. For the moment she was free. The moment would not last. How best could she use this opportunity? She could not imagine successfully using Edomic to bluff her way all the way out of Felrook. There would be too many guarded checkpoints. With Galloran's army outside, the whole fortress would be on high alert. But the lurkers were not far.

Lowering her head, Rachel reached out with her mind for the torivors. All she could sense was a direction, not the halls she needed to travel to get there. She began making her best guesses. She walked down a hall, turned a corner, and then quickstepped down another. She was up too high. More and more the torivors seemed directly beneath her. She needed stairs.

She passed a pair of soldiers who paid her no mind. Apparently, mysterious cowed figures were not an uncommon sight.

Eventually Rachel had to backtrack. A locked wooden door blocked the new way she wanted to go. She knelt and peered at the keyhole, then spoke a quiet Edomic command. She willed a twisting movement from the moving parts inside the lock. It had worked on 90 percent of the locks Ferrin had provided. It worked on this one.

The door clicked open, revealing a short hall. Behind an unlocked door she found a stairwell. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, she felt much nearer to the torivors. They were still lower than her, and off to the side. Her path toward them led her around a corner and into the view of two armed guards flanking an iron door. They wore the armor of conscriptors, and they clutched poleaxes. Swords and daggers hung ready at their waists.

Rachel knew that if she turned around, she would attract more attention than if she proceeded. Beyond the iron door the hall continued and then rounded a corner. If she walked past the guards and around the corner, she could regroup and figure out how to deal with them.

"Who goes there?" one of the conscriptors inquired before Rachel reached them.

Keeping her face down, Rachel stopped walking and shook her head, hinting that they shouldn't question her identity. She waited in silence.

“We have to ask your business down here,” the other conscriptor apologized, obviously concerned about who he might be addressing.

Maybe she could fake her way through this. Rachel did not try to disguise her voice, but she made it cold. “Maldor should have warned you I was coming. I am here to inspect the torivors.”

“Inspect the torivors?” the first conscriptor exclaimed. “Who are you?”

“That is none of your affair,” Rachel replied harshly.

“I’m afraid it is,” the other guard said, starting to sound rankled.

Switching to Edomic, Rachel suggested they flop to the ground. Both complied, their dropped weapons clattering. Rachel suggested that they keep still; then with a command and an effort of will she levitated both poleaxes and held the blades to their throats.

The combination of suggestions and commands left her feeling taxed, but she tried not to show it. She stood with her head bowed and her hands behind her back. The men were no longer pinned by her will, but the weapons at their throats seemed sufficient to keep them still. “Will you open the door, or do you mean to delay me further?”

“We don’t have the key,” the first conscriptor said, no defiance in his tone. “Only the emperor comes here, and never often.”

“I know,” Rachel lied, showing the keys she had taken from the guard upstairs, perfectly aware that none of them would open this door. “I am asking whether you intend to keep wasting my time.”

“If Maldor sent you,” the second guard responded, “and if you have the key, you are welcome to enter.”

With a word and a gesture, Rachel sent the poleaxes sliding down the stone floor of the hall. “Stay on the ground until I am gone, worms. See that I am not disturbed.”

The guards remained motionless on the floor. Rachel stepped past them and scraped a random key against the keyhole. She uttered a quiet command and felt the workings of the lock stir, but not enough to grant her access.

Despite her increasing heart rate, Rachel tried to stay calm. The mechanisms of some of the trickier locks at East Keep had to be turned left first, and then right. While she continued to rattle the key against the keyhole, Rachel uttered a pair of commands, first twisting the innards of the lock one way, then coaxing other moving parts in the opposite direction.

The lock disengaged, and Rachel opened the door. Deciding that it would be most convincing to offer no additional comment, Rachel stepped through and

closed the door. She was left in total darkness.

For a panicky moment she envisioned lurkers all around her. No, they were in the vicinity, but she still could not sense them clearly. Some barrier still intervened.

Starting at the doorway, Rachel felt her way along the wall to a corner three paces from the door. Following the next wall, after several small paces, she discovered a step down. She was on a landing at the top of a stairway. The stairs descended directly toward where she sensed the torivors.

Feeling higher along the wall, Rachel found a sconce holding a torch. She lit the torch with a word and removed it from the sconce. The trembling flame revealed a long stairway, probably forty steps. Unsure how long she had before the guards she had bluffed would initiate an angry pursuit, Rachel rushed down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, a short hall ended at a large mirror. Closer inspection revealed that the mirror was a polished metal door perforated by a grid of tiny holes. Eight pegs resided in the centermost holes of the top row. It was a lock like the ones Jason had described at the Repository of Learning and at the lorevault of Trensicourt. She had no idea how Edomic might help her open it. Inserting the pegs by trial and error would take weeks or months or years. Maybe longer.

Rachel could perceive the torivors behind the door. *Can you sense me?* she wondered, projecting the thought with all of the energy she could muster. *I need to speak with you. Can you answer?*

Although she could discern their collective presence, she recognized no individual thoughts. She was on her own opening the door. If she failed, this entire excursion would be for nothing. More likely than not, the day would dawn with her chained in the dungeon.

Rachel studied the door. It looked as though it had been fashioned from the same metal as the torivorian swords. The door itself was not going anywhere. But the door was anchored into the stone of the wall.

As soon as her thoughts turned to the message from Darian, Rachel knew what to do. Summoning her inner strength, she spoke a command to turn all the stone around the perimeter of the door to glass. She felt the directive succeed. The stone took on a glossy sheen and gained a hint of smoky translucence.

Raising her voice and extending one hand, Rachel mentally rammed the door with everything she had. For an instant the door shuddered. Tiny fractures



zigzagged across the surrounding glass. Dropping to one knee, Rachel kept up the pressure. The effort made her teeth ache down to the roots. Responding to a final surge of willpower, the door exploded inward, tearing free as its glass moorings shattered in a shower of shards.

Rachel dropped forward to her hands and knees, her torch clacking against the floor and rolling in a semicircle. She felt the cool stone beneath her palms. She could taste blood in her mouth. Her headache was returning. Her teeth ached and tingled. Her tongue felt numb. But her mind remained clear. She retrieved the torch and stood.

The room beyond the empty doorway was black. Her torchlight did not penetrate the darkness.

She could feel the lurkers beyond the threshold, their presence no longer muted or indistinct. There were dozens.

*I need to speak to a representative,* Rachel conveyed.

*You,* a torivor replied with recognition. *We are seldom visited.*

*I may not have much time,* Rachel emphasized. *I need to understand your relationship to Maldor. I may not be exactly like you, but I am a Beyonder as well. I want to free you.*

*Others have tried,* the lurker conveyed. *When Maldor sends us on assignments, we are not at liberty to communicate. But here we are, not operating under active instructions. Ask your questions.*

*Do you want to serve Maldor?* Rachel asked.

*We want one thing,* the torivor replied, the slow words carrying heavy emphasis. *Our freedom. We yearn for home. We can earn our freedom through service, according to the covenant.*

*Maldor bargained with you?* Rachel asked.

*Zokar instituted the covenant. He summoned us to this world and then subdued us. Where we come from, we need not die. Life is always. Here we are more vulnerable. We had to agree to the covenant or perish. Some of us chose oblivion. Most compromised.*

*If the agreement was with Zokar, how does Maldor control you?* Rachel wondered.

*The Myrkstone,* the torivor replied. *Truth is a principle of our existence. We cannot lie. We cannot break our oaths. Our oaths were bound to Zokar and the jewel. Maldor used the Myrkstone to secure our cooperation. We are under no other obligation to serve him. Our allegiance was to Zokar. Yet while the jewel survives, we remain bound to this world. Restricted by our vows, we are powerless to harm it. Only*

*by fulfilling our covenants can we escape its power. We often resist the will of Maldor. We do not relish servitude. But as we fulfill our promises as established by the covenant, we can escape the Myrkstone and return home. In the end, when he asks, we comply.*

Rachel thought about the command that had let her force open the burnished door. *What if I destroy the Myrkstone?*

*Then we would be free.*

*What if you agree to a new treaty with me? A treaty that goes into force after I destroy the stone? A treaty with simpler terms. A treaty that will free you sooner than your other arrangement.*

*Our interest would depend on your terms.*

*How many of you remain?*

*Seventy and one.*

Rachel tried not to grin. She looked over her shoulder. Nobody was coming for her yet. *I'm not sure how long I have. We had better start negotiating.*

# AN INTERRUPTED FEAST

The first sensation was of raindrops sliding down his body. The fat drops were sparse at first. He felt where each one kissed his bare arms, legs, or torso, and where the residual water traveled afterward. As the drops fell faster, they lost all individuality, spattering against his exposed skin and flowing in rivulets toward his naked feet. At first his loincloth absorbed some of the water, but soon it became saturated.

Next he became aware of the smells. The rain provided the dominant aroma, rich and humid, subtly shifting with the breeze and the intensity of the downpour. Lesser smells included wood smoke, wet stone, damp plants, and the beckoning allure of fresh blood. The layered scents were more vivid and intense than any sensory indulgence he had ever encountered. Was this how dogs experienced the world? He felt he could see with his nose.

His hearing was worse. Still acceptable, but not quite as sharp, muddied by unnatural echoes. The overlapping reverberations from the pattering rain masked nearly all other sound.

The pressure of the rope around his neck was constant, but it caused no pain. At least that had not changed.

Despite the absence of pain, the rainfall was not pleasant. Not because of the cool temperature. The more alert his mind became, the more the feel and smell of the water bothered him, like taking a bite of rotten meat or sipping spoiled milk. It felt *wrong*, smelled *wrong*, unsanitary, unwholesome, unwelcome. He resisted the urge to squirm.

Even with his eyes shut, Nedwin could feel that it was night. He breathed the moist air, unsure whether respiration remained necessary.

Nedwin opened his eyes.

He was dangling above the castle gate, strung up by his neck as an example for the kingdom to behold. They had not bothered to bind his hands or feet. No need, he supposed, when the man you were hanging was already dead. He felt a

surge of triumph. He had died, but the goma worms he had swallowed while Copernum gloated had brought him back.

Ingesting the worms had been a rash action. It placed the entire world in jeopardy. Then again, if Maldor was going to rule Lyrian, maybe a plague-ravaged nightmare was what he deserved.

Nedwin had taken the worms from Ebera, just in case. Collecting rare specimens had been his main occupation for years. When he had been left alone with an infected corpse, he had found the temptation irresistible. He knew that none of his comrades would have approved, but the deadly sample had offered him a final, potent weapon to employ in the event of a worst-case scenario.

As the wind rose, the rain lashed at him. His body swung in the darkness, the wet rope creaking. Grinding his teeth, he tried to ignore the foulness of the water. He traced the scar where Copernum's sword had penetrated his chest. The worms had knitted it neatly, but his enemies had hung him too high for anyone to notice.

If Maldor had already won, unleashing the plague would be a beguiling temptation. Many innocent people would die, but under the tyranny of Maldor those same innocents were already doomed. The plague would be merciful for many, and it would leave Maldor with nothing to rule.

But Nedwin could not dwell on that line of thinking. He had to hope that Galloran would emerge victorious. He had to trust the prophecy. He had not taken measures to revive himself in order to destroy the world. He would be careful. He would use this second chance to accomplish a very specific objective.

The night was dark, but his intuition insisted that it had not been dark for very long. Maybe the suspicion derived from the temperature of the storm. Maybe from the amount of heat radiating from the nearby stones of the castle wall. Maybe he was influenced by some nuance of the smell.

Nedwin also instinctively knew that he had been dead less than a day. This was the night after he had been killed. Why was he so certain? Was he guessing based on how little his body had decomposed? After feasting on his blood, the worms would have set about repairing and preserving him. Perhaps the worms knew how much time had passed, and at some level the knowledge was transferrable.

Reaching over his head, Nedwin climbed the rope attached to his neck. It required little effort. His muscles felt stronger than before. Interesting.

Squatting in a crenellation between merlons, Nedwin untied the noose. The wet rope could have proven tricky, but his fingers were strong and nimble.

A guard was coming his way, walking along the battlements. A dutiful man. Most would seek shelter during a downpour of this intensity. They would keep watch, but they would wait until the rain relented to actively patrol the walls. Nedwin crouched low, trying to keep his pale, freckled flesh out of view.

The blood of the oncoming guard was the sweetest aroma Nedwin's nose had ever savored. It was an olfactory symphony. He hungered for it, thirsted for it. He craved that blood like he craved sleep, air, friendship, and peace. The blood promised to satisfy all urges and to heal all wounds, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Lightning forked across the sky, jagged and close. Thunder crackled mightily.

The blood was off-limits. He had to remain in control of his urges. The worms had claimed his body. He could not let them have his mind. To taste that blood would spread the plague. To spread the plague would betray Galloran much worse than any of his previous failures. He had to resist. If he lacked the will to resist, he should have stayed dead.

Leaving eight fingers in view, Nedwin dangled from the wall and listened to the guard walk past. The guard did not pause. Nedwin pulled himself up, approached the guard from behind, seized him, and flung him over the wall. The man cried out before striking the ground. His armor clanged. The storm dampened the noise.

What next? Several stairways ran down the interior of the wall. Nedwin strode to the nearest one, hurried part of the way down, then leaped to the roof of a storage building. Working his way across the roof, Nedwin could feel the shingles creaking underfoot. He tried to be more careful and soon realized that he had lost some of his ability to move in silence. Was it due to a subtle reduction in motor skills? The loss of some instinct he had taken for granted? Interesting.

After hanging from the eaves of the storehouse, Nedwin dropped to the wet paving stones, landing in a crouch. Drenching rain pelted down around him. He took cover behind some barrels under the eaves. The rain and darkness would help hide him, but he could take nothing for granted. A lanky, pale, mostly unclothed man in the yard of a castle would draw the eye even under inclement conditions. All it would take was a single vigilant guard and the light of a lantern.

He needed to reach the stables and the castle entrance hidden there, but any route he took would force him to cross open ground. He was currently shrouded in shadow, but light gleamed from many windows and lanterns. More lanterns would be lit if the heavy rain persisted.

Nedwin wished for a cloak or a blanket. With the rainfall he had an ideal excuse to hide his face and move quickly. There would be useful items inside the storehouse, but the sturdy door was locked, and without his tools he could not pick it.

As the downpour lessened, Nedwin realized that if he hesitated any longer, he might lose his best chance to reach the secret passageway below the stables. Risking open ground while the rain was heavy would be safer than risking open ground once the guardsmen resumed their regular patrols.

Nedwin crept from building to building, staying near walls and vegetation, taking cover wherever it was available. He found a soiled, sodden blanket in a handcart and wrapped it over his head and shoulders. It failed to cover his bare legs, but it provided a far better disguise than nothing.

The rainfall had become gentle by the time Nedwin reached the stables. They were dark and saturated with the odors of horses—hay, oats, wood, leather, mud, dung, hide, and especially blood. The allure was not nearly as strong as with human blood, but it smelled much more appealing than any meal Nedwin could remember.

Ignoring the scents, Nedwin found the hatch to the basement and then the disguised hatch to the subbasement. Down in the darkness, his fingers found a hidden catch, and he proceeded into a quiet hall.

The smells here were mustier—dust, stone, wood, rot, mildew, and rat droppings. Nedwin caught whiffs of the living rats, noting that rat blood smelled nearly as desirable as horse blood.

He could see nothing. Nedwin had no seaweed, and no way to light the torches stashed beyond the entrance. But he could smell his way easily. He could smell the walls as clearly as see them, just as he could smell the open spaces of the halls and rooms. He could even smell the locations of spiderwebs.

While prowling the black corridors, Nedwin noticed for the first time that his heart was no longer beating. He paused, feeling the lack of a pulse in his wrist, then his neck, and finally his chest. More than hanging from the wall, more than his enhanced sense of smell, more than his memories of the fatal injury, the lack of a heartbeat forced Nedwin to confront the reality that he was truly dead.

Nedwin rubbed his jaw. His life was over. He no longer belonged in this world. He was an abomination. His body housed the seeds of a horrible plague. If those seeds were planted in others, all of Lyrian would become like Ebera.

He had a final mission to accomplish; then he could rest. He would be careful. He would need the orantium. On his way to the hidden stash of twelve globes, he kept his ears alert. Hearing had been his sharpest sense for years, and it was frustrating to have it hampered. Even without perfect hearing, it soon became evident that a feast was in progress. If Copernum was in attendance, the meal might provide just the opportunity he needed.

Stealth had already failed him. This time Nedwin would rely on overwhelming force. He would not survive, but survival was no longer a priority. He was already dead.

Nedwin found the orantium as expected, the twelve spheres bundled together in a sack, sawdust packed between them to help prevent an accidental detonation. He handled the sack gingerly.

By unseen passages Nedwin made his way to the dining hall. He climbed a ladder and peered out through a portion of tapestry that had been carefully thinned. Since he was looking from the darkness into the light, the colorful tapestry was almost transparent, affording him a good view of the roomy hall.

Nedwin stared in awe, hardly trusting his eyes. Not only was Copernum present, but so were the lords who had collaborated with him, including Dolan and the grand duke—more than forty conspirators in total. Who else had he expected to attend a feast sponsored by the usurper? Copernum was too smart to permit potential enemies near him at this early stage of the occupation.

Dessert had not yet been served, but the feast had obviously been in progress for some time. Many of the lords in attendance looked like they had already eaten their fill. Bustling servants shuttled away empty trays and plates. A large fire blazed in the huge hearth.

Nedwin could smell the food as never before. Beef, mutton, ham, chicken, turkey, and goose were present, with all their varied gravies, seasonings, and sauces. He smelled pea soup, chunky vegetable stew, mashed yams, fresh berries, pungent cheeses, buttered mushrooms, skewers of olives stuffed with garlic paste, and hunks of bread slowly growing stale.

Despite the diverse scents discernible in greater detail than ever before, the food did not smell appetizing. Not in the slightest.

All the aromas paled next to the intoxicating allure of fresh human blood.

Tonight the feast was not on the tables or in the kitchens. Tonight the feast was inside the diners, pumping round and round, warm and liquid and beckoning.

But Nedwin was not here to indulge his new appetite. No matter how brightly that desire burned, he must not heed it. He had a mission to accomplish.

He quietly unpacked the spheres from his sack, then replaced them without the sawdust for easier access. He practiced how he would hold the sack and how he would remove the spheres.

The secret entrance to the dining hall was concealed behind another tapestry, at the side of the room. It would not allow him to emerge near Copernum, but unless he was clumsy, it should be near enough.

Nedwin could not afford to wait. He needed to strike while Copernum remained. What if the head traitor excused himself before dessert?

Nedwin worked the releases and slid aside a cunningly constructed section of the stone wall. The section moved without much noise, disguised by boisterous conversation, clinking tableware, and hustling servants. The heavy tapestry still covered the gaping opening.

Thrusting the tapestry aside, Nedwin stepped into the dining hall. The fire in the hearth bothered his eyes, but not enough to slow him down. Most of the armed guards were clustered near the main door. The first orantium globe sailed their way. The second went to a nearer table. Both globes exploded in rapid succession, with white flashes and thunderous booms that echoed in the cavernous hall. The guards were thrown in all directions. One man lost his helmet. The table bucked and splintered, platters of food soaring into the air. Diners flipped and tumbled.

Startled faces turned his way. Nedwin saw shocked recognition in most of their eyes. All had professed loyalty to him and the crown. Smiling, he produced another orantium globe, tossing it at the guards near the table where Copernum, Dolan, and the grand duke dined. The explosion devastated the guards and overturned the table.

A quarrel hit Nedwin in the ribs. He observed it with mild interest. The projectile caused no pain and failed to hinder him. He rewarded the crossbowman for his accuracy with an orantium sphere that launched him, and others near him, into astonishing feats of acrobatics.

Servants were scattering, making for the doors to the kitchen. Nedwin threw a sphere there next, to dissuade people from exiting.



Some of the diners were pulling knives and drawing swords. Most were seeking cover. A hurled knife stuck in Nedwin's thigh, causing no significant harm or discomfort.

A group of nobles from the nearest tables charged Nedwin, forcing him to throw an orantium sphere closer than he liked. He felt the warm shockwave from the blast. The noise made his ears ring, and the flash left him dazzled. He staggered, but kept his feet. He could smell his own charred flesh.

Nobody was attacking him anymore. Most were pressing toward the doors. Nedwin threw a globe at the main doors and another at the doors used by the servants. The blasts claimed many lives.

"This is your reward for taking orders from a displacer!" Nedwin called, his voice strange in his ears. He threw a globe at some lords taking refuge behind an overturned table. A direct hit proved that orantium was much more powerful than wood.

Men screamed and moaned. Smoke filled the air. Nedwin stalked toward the table where Copernum was huddled. Their eyes met across the room. Nedwin had never seen Copernum looking bewildered or afraid. Tonight he saw both emotions displayed nakedly.

With three globes left, Nedwin hurled a sphere at another table where treacherous lords cringed. A few people were escaping out the doors. But not Copernum. Nedwin got close enough that he could not possibly miss, and demolished the table where Copernum cowered. Although it was heavier than the other tables, the orantium blasted it into kindling.

One globe remained.

Through the smoke, Nedwin saw Copernum scrambling away, his body bleeding and blackened. Dolan was dead. The grand duke was dead. Dozens of other traitors had perished.

"Wait, Nedwin!" Copernum cried, holding up a hand. His stunned eyes were desperate. Flecks of food had spattered his face and clothes. Splintered pieces of the table protruded from his body. "Wait! Kill me and Galloran dies. I have vital information!"

Nedwin shook his head. "Galloran has had enough of your help."

He threw the final sphere so that it shattered against the floor beside the disloyal chancellor. The glaring explosion did the rest.

Feeling oddly disconnected from himself, Nedwin looked around. The smoky room was still. Everyone had fled, had died, or was feigning death. He had

succeeded. He had unnaturally extended his life for a purpose, and the task had been accomplished. The realization brought profound relief.

Just to be sure, Nedwin checked a few ragged pieces of his former torturer. After all, he was a displacer. But it was no trick. Copernum was not temporarily disassembled. He was extremely dead.

“You’re even deader than I am,” Nedwin mumbled.

How soon before more guards came after him? Any minute. The thunder of the orantium would summon soldiers from all over the castle. Some of the guards might want to hesitate. They would hear what had happened from the survivors. They did not know he was out of orantium. And he was supposed to be dead. But not knowing that their leader had perished, they would also fear his wrath if they failed to act.

Nedwin walked toward the fire that still blazed in the hearth. He had deliberately not disturbed it with his barrage of orantium. He needed that fire.

Nedwin glanced at the secret passage. The dining hall remained still. He might be able to sneak away.

No. He had been fortunate. He had not only eliminated Copernum, but he had executed most, if not all, of the men capable of taking his place. Without the might of the giants, without treacherous nobles orchestrating the occupation, another revolution was inevitable. Justice had been served. The traitors had been punished. When Galloran returned, he would find allies running Trensicourt, not enemies.

Shuffling forward, Nedwin accepted that he would never see Galloran again. He would not be here to welcome his master home. But stories of this night would be everywhere. Galloran would find that his former squire had held true to the end, and that meant everything.

Nedwin paused near the hearth. The bright flames hurt his eyes. The warmth bothered his skin. Every instinct screamed for him to withdraw.

What if Galloran failed? What if the king never returned to his kingdom? If Maldor emerged victorious, Nedwin could unleash the plague and spoil the victory. Nedwin reconsidered a hasty escape. He thought about weeks of hiding, feeding on animals, waiting for news.

No. Too much could go wrong. For now, he felt certain that no worms had escaped his body. He had to keep it that way. He had to trust Galloran. But what if Maldor won? Nedwin bowed his head. He had no right to destroy the world. He had served Galloran to the best of his abilities. He must not sully his sacrifice. Bringing the worms out of Ebera had been his responsibility. Galloran

had never authorized it. Every moment that Nedwin survived increased the risk of an accidental infection. The worms had to burn, which meant he had to burn with them.

It had been many years since Nedwin had feared death. He did not fear it now. The fire was not appealing. The blood promised fulfillment. He could smell it everywhere. The fire promised misery. He heard footfalls. Guards were coming. They were too late. Nedwin threw himself into the fire, squirming until he was settled at the heart of the flaming logs.

Everything inside him recoiled. Every instinct screamed that he must flee. He was not in pain. The worms, maybe—not him. The fire was everywhere. Warm, not hot. It had seemed bright and horrible, but now he found it almost relaxing. He smelled it consuming him. His eyes were closed. He was not dying. He was already dead. This was just the end of his worn-out body. He had stayed sane through it all. Sane enough, at least. He had done his duty. He felt certain that Galloran would be proud of him, and the thought gave him comfort. He could no longer smell the burning. He could no longer hear the logs crackling. His hardships had ended. No pain would haunt this slumber. At long last, Nedwin rested.

# BEYONDERS

It was a long wait before Maldor arrived.

At first the emperor sent servants. But no conscriptors or displacers were willing to enter the shadowy room to retrieve Rachel. Not while she stood ringed by torivors. She had listened as her enemies had discussed the predicament. They were afraid of the emperor's displeasure. They were eager for his approval. But every single one of them was more afraid of the lurkers. None of them even crossed the threshold.

Rachel would have lost track of time, but the lurkers kept her informed. Their negotiations had been concluded for hours. She did not engage them in casual conversation. According to the lurkers, the sun was already well above the horizon when Maldor appeared in the doorway.

He looked more like the smug gentleman who had visited her dream. He no longer appeared weary or infirm. No evidence remained of the facial paralysis. He wore dark, regal attire. The Myrksstone glittered against his chest.

Rachel wrung her hands. She was nearly out of time. This would be her only chance. She had to get it right.

"Such foolishness," Maldor fussed amiably. "You have placed yourself in grave danger, Rachel. Come out of there."

"I'm very comfortable," Rachel said from within her protective ring of torivors. "Could you have my bed brought here? And maybe some food?"

A torch in his hand, Maldor stared at her patiently. He did not cross the threshold. "I am impressed that you accessed this chamber. Getting past the guards required talent, but tearing out the door exceeded my expectations. The portal and the walls were all reinforced with Edomic."

Rachel was glad for the information. It confirmed that she had turned the stone to glass even though it had been enchanted. "I was determined."

"Why? Have you any notion of the peril you face? Inside that room I cannot hold the torivors in check."

“Do I look worried?” Rachel asked. “I have a lot in common with the torivors. We communicate with our minds. We’re here against our will. And none of us belong to this world. We’re all Beyonders.”

Maldor chuckled condescendingly. “You have very little in common with them, Rachel. If you have let them convince you otherwise, there may already be no rescuing you. These are no frightened prisoners. You are among caged predators who would tear this world to shreds if given the chance. If you come out of there immediately, I may still be able to save you.”

“They’re not harming me,” Rachel said.

“No matter what you imagine, Rachel, they are using you. Make no sudden movements. Walk to me slowly.”

“No. I trust you less than I trust them.”

“I’m sorry for the discomfort you suffered while trying to slay me,” Maldor said. “You wield surprising power for one so young. I defended myself as gently as the circumstances permitted.”

“You want to turn me into a freak, complete with displacer parts and a magic word that can destroy me.”

Maldor raised his palms. “You are loyal to the losing side. You have not disguised the fact that you are my enemy and that you would harm me if you could. As much as I admire your talent and wish to see it increase, I must take measures to protect myself. Considering the circumstances, I believe I have been both generous and understanding. That will cease if you do not come out of there.”

“What if I refuse?”

Maldor fingered his Myrystone pendant. “I will order one of them to bring you to me. And then for the first time you will truly experience my displeasure.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Rachel said. “They don’t have to obey your commands. Zokar was a different story. You don’t have the same power over them. You can cause them suffering, and you can hold them bound until they fulfill their covenant, but the torivors are free to resist your demands. They can make you suffer too.”

Maldor was no longer trying to appear kindly. “How dare you defy me in my own castle? Do you know where your brave Galloran is at the moment? Running. Fleeing with his pathetic host. My forces are pouring into the valley. They are currently reclaiming the empty keeps and mustering around Felrook, awaiting my orders. Your comrades cannot run for long. At my leisure it will be a simple matter to cut off all escape and destroy them to the last man.”

“You think so?” Rachel asked.

“This is absurd. I have no need for a torivor to expel you. I need only deny you food and water and watch as you waste away. I will bring you the heads of the friends you might have saved had you been more cooperative.”

“Wait,” Rachel said. “Would you still spare ten of my friends?”

He gave her a flat stare. “I would if you provide the opportunity. Your comrades are running out of time. Even I cannot restore the dead to life.”

Rachel hung her head, hoping she looked defeated. “I’m afraid to come out. You humiliated me. You hurt my mind; you hurt my body; you crushed my hope. You wounded my faith in my magic. I wasn’t trying to anger you by coming to the lurkers. I just wanted to find a place where you couldn’t touch me. A place where I didn’t feel powerless. This was what I came up with.”

Maldor’s expression softened a degree. “An innovative option, but any kinship you have imagined between yourself and the torivors can only be based on a horrible misunderstanding of their natures. I mistrust this penitent charade, Rachel, but if you come out of there voluntarily, I pledge to forgive you. The cause you fought for is lost. Your people are on the run. The last rebellion has been crushed. It is time for you to choose a new cause. You fear what Lyrian will become under my rule? I offer you the position and power necessary to influence change. We need not be enemies. Come, Rachel, do not tarry in the shadows.”

“Will we be alone? I want to talk more.”

Maldor turned and made a gesture. “We will be alone.”

“You’ll still save ten of my friends?”

“If you emerge and provide the names, I will do everything in my considerable power to spare your favorites.”

*I will go to him now,* Rachel conveyed to the torivors.

The tenebrous figures stepped out of her way.

“Will you back away?” Rachel asked. “You frighten me.”

“Will you emerge if I depart?” Maldor asked.

“Don’t leave,” Rachel said, her voice quavering. “I want to talk. Just give me some space. I’m having a very hard day.”

“Understood,” Maldor said, backing down the hall.

Rachel walked forward to the threshold. She hesitated, waiting until he had retreated a good distance down the corridor. “Are you going to attack me with Edomic?”

“Not unless you attack me,” Maldor said.

“I don’t want to ever attack you again,” Rachel said, stepping across the threshold. “But I do want to show you a command somebody taught me.”

“Who?”

“Orruck.”

His eyes widened.

Her mind felt clear. She had prepared for this moment for hours. Really, she had prepared for this moment ever since arriving in Lyrian. She had prepared by discovering her talent for Edomic. She had prepared with long hours of practice at Mianamon and elsewhere. Her will had been strengthened by those she had loved and lost. Her will had been reinforced through the stalwart examples of heroes like Galloran and those who served him. Her resolve had increased as she beheld the evil that Maldor represented. Her faith had been armored by the prophecy Jason had retrieved. Even her recent failure to defeat Maldor had helped her prepare.

Without pause Rachel put everything into the command. Her life depended on this moment. It was not hard to muster genuine emotion. All her fear, anger, and grief. All her hope, faith, and love. Her desire to live. All the strength of will that she could summon.

She focused on Maldor’s pendant and uttered the command that would change stone to glass.

She felt the command succeed.

Maldor stared down in bewildered surprise.

The altered Myrkstone had a slightly different sparkle, but she could still sense power in it. Rachel had known the transformation alone might not be enough. She was ready.

Issuing suggestions in rapid succession, Rachel urged Maldor to lie down, to sleep, to run, to jump, to turn around, and to be silent. After he had almost obeyed her during their duel, Maldor had used that tactic on her, confusing her with multiple instructions. She knew that she was sharing the suggestions with greater subtlety and expertise than ever before.

Rachel saw Maldor struggling to resist her suggestions, but she did not pause to relish his temporary indecision. Raising her voice, using commands taught to her by Chandra, commands Orruck had forced her to practice in his presence, Rachel lifted the pendant off Maldor, slipping the chain over his head and into the air, then smashed it down to the floor.

The Myrkstone shattered.

Its quiet aura of power dissipated.

Recovering from the brief befuddlement of her suggestions, Maldor gaped at the particles and slivers of broken glass on the floor. Furious eyes found Rachel.

He barked a vicious command, drawing massive amounts of heat to her clothes.

Calmly, certainly, Rachel uttered the command he had used to disperse her fire attack. She had only heard the words once, but she had always been a quick study. Maldor crumpled as his command failed, clutching his stomach as he gagged and retched.

From his hands and knees, he glared at Rachel with enraged, bloodshot eyes. Then his expression changed, the fury melting into a terrified realization. Maldor was no longer staring at Rachel. He was looking over her shoulder.

She turned and saw a lurker emerging from the dark chamber, as agreed, a sleek sword held in each hand. The lurker silently walked past her and tossed one of the weapons to Maldor. The emperor dodged aside, letting the sword ring against the stone floor. The lurker continued toward him unhurried.

Paying no heed to Rachel, Maldor looked from the lurker to the sword on the floor. Extending a hand, Maldor issued an Edomic suggestion, telling the lurker to impale itself. Rachel could sense that in his desperation he was pushing much too hard. When the command failed, the emperor dropped to the floor and vomited.

The lurker kept approaching with measured, fluid strides. Wiping his lips, Maldor looked up, crazed eyes full of terror. The lurker had almost reached him. The emperor raised both hands, palms outward, his lips moving hastily.

The blade sliced down on a trajectory to divide Maldor's head from his shoulders, but glanced away before reaching him. The torivor kept swinging. A barrage of potentially lethal strokes bounced aside as the sword struck a thin dome of energy that only flashed into view on impact. Each time the blade connected with the barrier, the dome gleamed blue white before fading from view.

The lurker kept swinging without hesitation. Maldor kept his palms raised, his expression concerned but determined, his gaze fixed on the lurker.

Rachel had expected the torivor to slay Maldor. But at least for the moment he was trapped. A brief, hysterical laugh escaped before her hands covered her mouth, tears warping her vision. Had she really done it? Would this hold him? Was she really going to live?

Maldor showed no sign of escaping. Blows rained down without interruption. The emperor didn't even glance her way.



Lurkers flooded from the chamber. Three stopped beside Rachel.

*Well done, one of them conveyed.*

Likewise, Rachel answered, struggling to regain her composure. *What will happen to Maldor?*

*The attacker will not relent, the lurker pledged. The defensive effort is taxing Maldor. He cannot hold out indefinitely. Escape is unlikely.*

*You'll fulfill the rest of our agreement?* Rachel checked.

*We cannot lie, the lurker responded.*

*Then take me to Galloran.*

# SACRIFICE

Tark surfaced inside the mine, gasping desperately. Luminous seaweed in hand, he crawled out of the water, his hair and pants dripping. He wore no shirt or shoes. He lay on his back, drinking in the earthy air. The swim had tested him to his limits.

Thanks to Ferrin, Tark had known exactly where to find the entrance to the mine and how far he would need to swim in order to reach the ancient air trapped inside. The entrance had been a long way down. Even with weights to aid his dive, the descent had consumed an alarming amount of time, the pressure building as he sank. Rocks clogged the entrance, but he had stroked through the gap Ferrin had made. For twenty feet it had been tight. Afterward, his lungs complaining, he had advanced along the underwater excavation until the tunnel finally elbowed upward and he had emerged here.

Not many men could have survived that swim. Ferrin had warned that it would be challenging, and the displacer had not been wrong. Tark sat up. His task was far from complete. All of Lyrian was counting on him.

By the light of his seaweed Tark saw the tools Ferrin had left. Multiple pickaxes, pry bars of varying length, rope, spare seaweed, and half a dozen orantium spheres, including one of the large gatecrashers. Ferrin had rehearsed the route that would take him to where the mine had been sealed off. The information had been shared not long before Ferrin was taken into custody.

Tark had informed Galloran how Naman had arrested Ferrin, but by the time Galloran confronted the commander of the seedfolk, the displacer had already quietly escaped. Ferrin had not been spotted since.

But Tark could not afford to dwell on that now. Led by Galloran, the retreat was already underway. Tark had to keep moving. The timing was crucial. According to Ferrin, the extensive tunnels should hold plenty of breathable air. The timing concerns involved the placement of Maldor's forces. Trying to warm himself, Tark briskly rubbed his arms. If he could hurry and detonate the vein of

orantium while the vast host was massing around Felrook, the war might realistically end with a single blow.

Tark began gathering supplies.

Farther along the tunnel, a glow appeared beyond the reach of Tark's light. Ferrin held a newly lit length of seaweed in one hand and a large crossbow in the other. The crossbow was casually aimed at Tark.

"Ferrin?" Tark asked.

"Hello." He was frowning, his voice neutral. He looked weary and disheveled.

Tark had never seen Ferrin disheveled.

Tark's hand slid toward his knife.

"Don't touch that knife," Ferrin warned. "My finger is quicker than your arm." The displacer was missing his nose.

"What is this?" Tark asked, slowly raising both hands.

"What does it look like?" Ferrin asked. "After all I did, Naman arrested me."

Tark winced. "I know. Galloran was upset. He tried to intervene, but you were already gone."

"I believe he would have tried. But the time had come to take matters into my own hands. My captors left me a small opportunity to escape, and I took it. The experience served as a sobering reminder. If you detonate that vein of orantium, the Amar Kabal win. And the displacers lose. Forever."

Tark nodded. "You knew that from the start."

"But what were the chances we would actually succeed? Did you expect it?"

"I don't know."

"I didn't. Not really. But here you are, about to spill your blood down in the bowels of the earth to create a flash of orantium like the world has never known. I failed to give Esmira the proper credit."

"Seems she had a gift," Tark agreed. He glanced from the crossbow to Ferrin's eye. "Have you been toying with us all along?"

"I'm not sure what I've been doing," Ferrin replied. "I've been open about that with those who have bothered to ask. I'm not sure how I expected this to end. I certainly never thought I would find myself in a position to receive an imperial pardon."

"You really think Maldor would pardon you?"

"Naman seemed to think so," Ferrin said wryly. "The prospect once seemed impossible. I had crossed too many lines, burned too many bridges. But what if I were able to warn the emperor that Felrook had unwittingly been constructed

on top of a mountain full of explosives? What if I could singlehandedly save his armies and his life? That would probably do the job.”

“I can’t believe this,” Tark sighed. Everyone was counting on him. He could not fail! His mind frantically searched for a workable strategy. Ferrin would not miss with the crossbow. Even without it, Tark knew how well the displacer could fight.

Ferrin smirked. “It’s amazing that this fortress didn’t explode long ago. They could have tunneled into the orantium when digging the dungeons. The dungeons of Felrook are deep. A little deeper, and they might have had quite a surprise.”

“You swore to uphold our cause,” Tark said. “You swore to Galloran and Jason and Rachel.”

“I did,” Ferrin admitted. “Naturally, they all expected me to lie. It’s what displacers do. Thanks to Naman, I’ve enjoyed some time alone to consider a new plan. Want the essentials? First, I shoot you. Then I inform Maldor that his fortress is built atop a mother lode of orantium. He wipes out the forces fleeing into the mountains, then chooses a new stronghold from which to rule for a thousand years. The smug seedmen fall. And I get pardoned. Nothing short of service this crucial would earn Maldor’s forgiveness, but I expect this would prove more than sufficient.”

“Maybe,” Tark said, hoping to plant doubt.

“When I spoke with the oracle, she told me that before the end I would have the chance to decide the outcome. I didn’t expect the opportunity to be so blatant. Perhaps neither did she.”

“Don’t do it,” Tark said. “Galloran still has part of your neck.”

“I appreciate the concern,” Ferrin laughed. “I’m resourceful. I could get to Maldor before Galloran had any inkling of my betrayal. Some quick emergency graftings, and I would be fine.”

“Why am I still alive?” Tark asked, aware that the quarrel could be loosed at any moment. “I can’t stop you.”

“Nobody can stop me. Today, right now, the future of Lyrian teeters on a knife-edge, and I get to determine which way it will fall. To side with Maldor will preserve my people and provide me with a long life as a noble lord. They might even grant me one of the few remaining displacer women as a companion.” He paused, his eyes momentarily distant. “To side with Galloran would buy me death and grant victory to my ancestral enemies.”

“You don’t have to die,” Tark said. “You could still try to flee.”

“I will not flee. I’ve fled enough. If I kill you, I will have no reason to flee. If I let you destroy Felrook, I will remain at your side and see it done. If my people must fall, I will be man enough to fall with them. There would be no place for me in the world after that.”

Tark felt a glimmer of hope. “Are you still undecided?”

“Not anymore. Funny. I came down here still uncertain, angry, all the possibilities dancing in my mind. I doubt anyone could have guessed what would sway my final verdict. Displacers have a reputation as selfish schemers, and my personal reputation is among the worst. But in the end I’ll make this choice based on friendship. It’s even surprising to me. I’ve never had friends before. Not real ones. Now I have three friends in the world, Tark. Three people who I truly love and respect. None are displacers. None serve Maldor. My friends are Jason, Rachel, and Galloran. In the end, with the fate of Lyrian in my hands, I’m not willing to let them down. I couldn’t harm them and live with myself. They’ll never know about this decision. They’ll never know how much their friendship meant to me. But I’ll know, and that’s enough.”

Ferrin lowered the crossbow.

“Really?” Tark asked. He had turned, offering his arm as a target rather than his chest. He had been braced to attack Ferrin after the quarrel hit. He had been braced to drag himself, bleeding, toward the orantium vein.

Ferrin gave a nod. “Naman made me angry. But I don’t care about him any more than I care about Maldor. Why should either of them influence me? You treated me well when the seedmen came for me. Galloran, Jason, and Rachel have consistently treated me well. They wanted this, so they’re going to get it. Besides, I gave Jason my word. Nobody has ever asked that of me. Not directly. Not knowing who I was. It pleases me to reward him for it.” The displacer seemed to relax, as if uttering his intentions had made the decision real.

“If you’re serious, we ought to hurry.”

“Agreed. I know where the sealed portion of the mine begins, but it could still be a chore to reach the vein itself. Before Naman apprehended me, I had considered suggesting to Galloran that I join you, but I worried that he might object to my presence here at such a sensitive time.”

Tark was already gathering gear. “Nobody can stop you now. I expect I’ll be glad you’re with me before the end. This is a weighty responsibility for one man.”

Ferrin collected the gear that Tark could not carry. The displacer led them deeper into the mine, taking turns that Tark had memorized. After a long

stretch down a straight tunnel, they reached a wall of rubble. Deep engravings etched the walls. Tark understood none of the writing. "Can you read this?"

"A variety of ancient languages are represented," Ferrin reported. "I can only read one of them. It warns intruders away. I checked all the tunnels. This was the only premature ending, and the only one marked."

"This might only be the first barrier," Tark said.

"I made the same guess," Ferrin replied. "But I decided I had better not investigate until Galloran got away. It would have been a shame to destroy our own armies along with Felrook."

Tark studied the wall of rubble, selected a pry bar, and went to work. After a minute or two he started giving Ferrin instructions. Together they heaved stones out of the way. After most of an hour, Tark paused, panting, holding his seaweed into the high gap they were creating. "I can see the far side. The tunnel goes on."

Ferrin held up a canteen. "Water?"

"Don't mind if I do." Tark tipped his head back and drank. "I wonder if that will be the last I ever drink?"

"I don't think we're that lucky," Ferrin replied, wiping his forehead. Dust clung to his perspiration, and the action smeared it. "I expect we have more work ahead of us."

They cleared the remaining obstacles and brought their gear through the gap. The tunnel angled downward. They advanced until they reached an iron gate. The bars of the gate and its frame stretched from floor to ceiling, utterly blocking the way. Carvings decorated the walls.

"More warnings?" Tark asked.

"Everything I can recognize says to turn back," Ferrin replied. He rattled the gate. It had several locks. He peered at them. "These locks are corroded. I can't pick them. The iron still feels relatively solid. Orantium?"

"I would hate to risk a cave-in," Tark said, "but it might be our only choice."

"Where do we place it?"

Tark cut a length of rope and tied one of the smaller spheres near the center of the gate's hinges. They backed well away and flung rocks until the sphere shattered and the mineral inside exploded. The blast echoed down the long tunnel, the thunder skipping and rebounding as if the rumble were reaching for infinity.

Although damaged, the gate remained partially intact. A little work with their tools pried part of it open far enough for them to slip through.

Around a bend they encountered another wall of rubble. It proved to be very thick, requiring more than an hour of heavy labor with pickaxes and pry bars complemented by two orantium blasts. The first orantium blast actually seemed to make matters worse, but the second helped considerably.

Once on the far side, Ferrin and Tark finished the last of the water.

“That may be your last drink,” Ferrin said. “Unless we head back for more.”

“This is already taking longer than I’d like,” Tark said, running his tongue over his teeth. Even after the water, his mouth tasted gritty.

“Think of it as giving Rachel some extra time to get away,” Ferrin said.

“Do you think she has a chance?”

Ferrin shrugged. “Part of the prophecy was meant specifically for her. We have good reason to trust that Darian the Seer knew his craft. I expect that means she has a good chance. Since I’ll never know the truth, I prefer to assume she’ll survive.”

Tark and Ferrin proceeded along the tunnel. Up ahead, floor-to-ceiling bars blocked the way. They had an odd sheen, almost golden. Fifty feet beyond the hefty bars, the tunnel terminated. A white, pasty substance covered the end of the tunnel.

Ferrin rubbed the fat bars, then tapped his knuckles against one. “It makes no sound.”

Tark hit a bar with a pickax. The impact was much quieter than it should have been. “What is it?”

“I have no idea,” Ferrin said. “Some alloy. Something strong. It hasn’t corroded at all. It looks to be anchored deeply in the floor and ceiling. There is no gate. No hinges. Nobody was meant to get past here.”

Leaning on a long pry bar, Tark sighed. “Not only did they conceal the location of the mountain. Not only did they submerge the entrance under a huge lake. Not only did they erect multiple barriers. Now this.”

“That white coating at the end of the tunnel,” Ferrin pointed out. “Do you suppose it is meant to seal off the vein?”

“I sure hope so,” Tark said. “If the tunnel continues behind it, we could be in trouble.”

Ferrin studied the wall of bars. “We could attack the stone. Blast it. Try to remove a bar that way.”

“We could,” Tark said. “I’m not optimistic. These bars are thick. They were put here to stay. They enter seamlessly into the natural stone. I think they may have been inserted using Edomic.”

“The bars are spaced close together,” Ferrin said. “Even taking it slowly, I don’t think I could pass myself through piece by piece. But I can send my arms.” They crouched. Ferrin detached one arm and passed it between the bars. Tark grabbed the other and placed it through.

“Hand me the smallest pick,” Ferrin instructed.

Tark passed a pick between the bars. One of Ferrin’s hands accepted it. His arms began working their way down the tunnel, moving like overgrown, fleshy inchworms. Before long they reached the end of the tunnel. The free hand probed the white substance on the wall.

“Feels like clay,” Ferrin reported. One arm awkwardly tried using the pick. The hand without the pick tore away the white substance faster. Soon Ferrin dropped the pick and started clawing white clay from the base of the wall, one small handful at a time.

“If this is the last barrier,” Tark said, “you might reach the orantium at any second.”

“Wouldn’t that be a happy surprise?”

“I wonder if we’ll have time to notice.”

“It might be quick, but I think we’ll feel it coming.”

Gripping the cool metal bars, Tark watched tensely as the minutes passed. The hands could not reach high, so they gradually excavated a tunnel at the base of the white wall. More minutes dragged by. “I wish I could help.”

Sweat beaded on Ferrin’s brow. “Me too.”

Tark chuckled. “Want me to fetch water?”

“You might miss the blast.”

“I think I’ll notice.”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

Taking the canteen, Tark retraced their steps, clamoring through rubble and walking along manmade tunnels until he reached the place where he had entered the air pocket. He stared at the dark water. Did Ferrin really need his help? Tark glanced over his shoulder at the empty tunnel, then back at the water. What if he made a run for it? Might he get away? Probably not. The explosion should happen soon.

Tark shook his head. The musings were reflexive. He had run away more than once in his life. The thoughts were familiar, but today he had little desire to heed them. The displacer could not be trusted to finish the job. He had to stay and see this done. It was his chance to make things right, the chance he had always wanted.



Crouching, Tark lowered his lips and drank directly from the water. Then he filled the canteen.

On the way back, Tark thought about others who had sacrificed to make this moment possible. He thought about the members of the Giddy Nine. He thought about Tristan, who had died as they'd escaped Harthenham. He thought about Chandra, and Raz, and Dorsio, and the oracle. He thought about Drake. He thought about Io trying to protect Rachel. He thought about Ferrin, down here with him in the dark, digging toward a cataclysm.

When Tark reached Ferrin, the white tunnel at the base of the wall went back four feet. "You're a good man," Tark said.

"That might be something of an exaggeration," Ferrin replied, "but under the circumstances I'll take it."

Tark jutted his chin toward where Ferrin's arms were working. "I couldn't have done this without you."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"You want a drink?"

"I'll need your help."

Ferrin knelt, and Tark poured water into his mouth. After pausing to let him swallow, he poured more. "Keep going?"

"Sure."

Tark shared water until Ferrin had drunk his fill. Down the tunnel, the hands and arms kept digging.

"Are you afraid to die?" Tark asked, taking a swig himself before setting aside the canteen.

Ferrin paused. Tark glimpsed something in his eye, a quiet struggle to remain in control. Maybe a hint of worry. "Yes, if I'm being honest. But we all have to go. I was trying to think of a better way than this. I couldn't."

Tark nodded. "I hear you. Ever play stones?"

"Sure."

"My father taught me the game. I'm no expert. Neither was he. But he taught me that sometimes you have to sacrifice a stone or two to gain a strategic advantage. He told me that sacrifice means trading something good for something better. It stuck with me. I guess it applies today."

Ferrin gave a nod. "I suppose it does. In fact, I find that a very rational way to look at it."

Tark sighed. "I feel like I've cheated death a lot."

"I could say the same. I suspect both of us have run out of extra chances."

“I hope so. For the sake of the battle, I mean.”

Ferrin furrowed his brow. “What have we here?”

“What?” Tark asked, peering at the end of the tunnel.

“I think I’ve made it through the white stuff,” Ferrin said. “There’s something behind it. Something flat. Not stone. It feels like wood. Slightly spongy, though not as soft as cork.”

“Can you tear it apart?”

“I’m trying.” Ferrin winced. “Just tore a fingernail. Ouch, and another one. It feels pretty firm. Dare we hope this is truly the end?”

“Should we try orantium?” Tark asked.

Ferrin nodded. “It might be our only remaining option. I wish we could use the gatecrasher, but there is no way it will fit through the bars.”

“A normal one might do it,” Tark said.

“Let’s find out,” Ferrin said.

An arm came scissoring back to them. Tark handed it an orantium sphere, and the arm wriggled away.

“Use the crossbow,” Ferrin said. “I want to get my arms clear, in case this doesn’t work and we need more use out of them. I swear, Tark, if I have to cram myself through these bars piece by piece, I will see it done.”

“I thought you said it would be too hard,” Tark replied.

“It would be risky,” Ferrin replied. “There are limits to how much of myself I can separate at once. If my displacement fields falter, I would become a big mess. Still, if all else fails, I’ll try it.”

Tark laid down on the ground and sighted with the crossbow. “It’s too dark. I can’t see the target.”

“Throw a bit of seaweed that way.”

Tark tore off a segment of seaweed and threw it through the bars. An arm moved to retrieve it. Tark settled back on the ground. After the arm put the seaweed at the back of the white clay excavation, Tark could see the globe perfectly.

“Give me a moment,” Ferrin said as his arms retreated. “Want me to take the shot?”

“I can do it.”

“I have two spare quarrels. With that bow at this distance, you’ll want to aim about four inches high. No wind. The quarrel should fly straight.”

Tark aimed as Ferrin described. The arms reached the bars.

“Do you want to attach your arms?” Tark asked.

“No,” Ferrin said. “I’m missing an eye, an ear, my nose, part of my neck, even part of an artery in one arm. It’s fitting that I should meet my end in pieces. We might still be hours away from a conclusion. Or this might be it.” Ferrin turned slightly and looked right at Tark, giving him a nod. “You’re a brave man, Tark. It has been an honor.”

“Likewise,” Tark said, letting his mind relax as he squeezed the trigger.

The quarrel sprang from the crossbow. At the end of the hall the orantium shattered. The mineral inside flared white and exploded. After a gasping rush of air, there came a second, stronger explosion. The second blast wave sent Tark rolling. Debris slammed against the bars. With a stronger rush of air, a third detonation followed. The last thing Tark knew was a sense of relief coupled with an intense white flash.

# THE FLASH

The sun was almost to the top of the sky by the time the lurkers delivered Rachel to Galloran. She found him in the western foothills, on the far side of a stony bluff. Having sensed the lurkers coming, the king reacted with apprehension at first, but soon Rachel explained how she had destroyed the Myrkstone and entrapped Maldor.

“You struck a bargain with the torivors?” Galloran clarified.

“Most are free to go,” Rachel explained. “They can return to their home world. But three must unconditionally serve you until the day you die. It seemed fair, because three have attacked you with swords. And one must unconditionally serve Jason for as long as he lives and remains in this world, because they sent one for him. And one must unconditionally serve Farfalee, because one of them killed her brother.”

“Unconditionally?” Galloran asked. “No limits? Not even Zokar attained that level of commitment.”

Rachel shrugged. “I guess Zokar didn’t free most of them.”

“Will any serve you?” Galloran asked.

“One used swords to attack Maldor for me,” Rachel said. “He’ll keep on him until the job is done. And the three that will serve you vowed to help me escape Felrook and bring me to you. That was all I really needed.”

“So Maldor is pinned down by a former minion,” Galloran mused, his mismatched eyes remote. “Yes, I can sense his Edomic exertions—potent, but strained. He seems both weary and unwavering, no doubt still holding off the torivor. A protective barrier such as he raised requires a great deal of power and concentration. As long as the lurker stays on him, Maldor won’t have an opportunity to attempt any other commands.”

“The torivors promised that the attack would not end until Maldor died,” Rachel said.

Galloran shook his head and fixed Rachel with an intense gaze. “Do you know how many people have tried to undo the emperor? The attempts date

back to the war between Zokar and Eldrin. Great warriors and wizards have failed.” The king chuckled. “I privately feared he might find a way to escape the upcoming blast. Now I can rest easier. You have distracted and incapacitated him at precisely the right time. For years Maldor feared others with Edomic talent. Yet he insisted on you as his apprentice. That arrangement did not take long to unravel.”

“I got lucky,” Rachel said. “He was a much stronger wizard than me. The prophecy gave me the crucial hint. Orruck’s command worked perfectly on the Myrystone, turning it to glass. When I first faced Maldor, I noticed that an Edomic suggestion momentarily stunned him. So I hit him with a bunch of suggestions that slowed him long enough for me to smash the Myrystone. Then he attacked my clothes with fire. When I had fought him earlier, he’d spoken words to quench my fire, and I memorized them. I guess he didn’t expect me to remember.”

“Fire is the quickest attack,” Galloran said. “He was probably furious and reaching for a hasty victory.”

“He didn’t have much time,” Rachel said. “By the time the fire had failed, the lurker was on him.”

Galloran nodded. “He harnessed dark entities to do his bidding. That can lead to peril if the harness breaks. I am overjoyed that you survived, Rachel, and unspeakably proud of you.”

“What now?” Rachel asked, blushing slightly. “What was the big weakness you discovered? You said something about a blast?”

“Felrook is built upon the mount where orantium was mined anciently. The mining was halted because they encountered a vein too large to extract. Tark is currently working to expose that vein.”

Rachel covered her mouth. “Oh no.”

“He was eager for the opportunity,” Galloran assured her. “He volunteered without coaxing. The mine entrance was so deep underwater that he was the only man for the job. Maldor has founded a mighty empire. Even if he perishes, others could rise to finish what he started. But if the mountain erupts soon, his top leaders and his main fighting forces will be obliterated with him.”

Rachel looked around. She almost didn’t want to ask. “What about Ferrin?”

“Ferrin found the mine for us in the depths of the lake. After he explored it and shared the specifics with Tark, Naman, unbeknownst to me, took him captive to ensure he would stay out of the way.”

Hot anger welled up inside of Rachel. “Where is he?”

“Ferrin promptly escaped,” Galloran said. “He has not been seen since. He may have fled into the wilderness, but I suspect he went to the mine. If so, our future is in his hands as much as in Tark’s. I still have a piece of his neck. If the mountain erupts, we’ll know whether he was there.”

“In the mine?” Rachel repeated numbly. “I can’t lose him, Galloran. We’ve lost too many people. It’s too much. Send a lurker. Send a lurker to retrieve him.”

Galloran gave a nod.

Rachel sensed the king mentally communicating with one of the three lurkers. He made sure the dark figure knew who Ferrin was, then asked the torivor to fetch him.

Before the torivor could leave, the rumbling began, a brisk series of distant, mounting explosions. By the end of the thunderous crescendo, everyone had clamped their hands over their ears. A white flash seared the sky. Rachel heard the blast wave as it swooshed past, bringing the odor of scorched minerals, but the stony bluff prevented her from feeling the brunt of it.

The bluff also blocked Felrook from view. After the blast wave it was not long before rocks came hailing from above, ranging in size from marbles to houses. A meteoric boulder the size of a garbage truck shook the ground when it landed a couple of hundred yards away. The thumping patter of falling material persisted for many seconds.

By the time Rachel and Galloran had scrambled around the side of the bluff, Felrook and the soaring cliffs where it had rested were gone, replaced by an immense, charred crater, its dimensions larger than the former boundaries of the vaporized lake. While escaping, Rachel had viewed the armies occupying the keeps and assembling on the plains around Lake Fellion. Now it was like they had never existed. Everything near Felrook had been devastated—the keeps, the ferry town, the vegetation, the enemy armies. That part of the valley had instantly become a scorched wasteland. As Rachel stood silently beside Galloran, overwhelmed by the bleak sight, the sooty cloud overhead kept unfolding, creating a premature twilight.

Rachel became aware of people around her—drinlings, seedfolk, human soldiers—all with their eyes glued to the desolation left by the explosion. They moved like sleepwalkers, stunned, disbelieving. Some were injured. Most looked disheveled.

Rachel realized that most of the fleeing soldiers would not have known that Galloran had a plan to take down Felrook. They thought they were running

from a vast army that would pursue and slay them. At best they might have hoped Galloran had some evasive maneuvers in mind that would lead their enemies on a long chase.

Now, without explanation, Felrook was gone, along with the enemy armies. In one inexplicable moment the war was over. Defeat had turned to victory as if by magic.

A trio of drinlings let out a cheer. Their enthusiastic outburst sparked other reactions. Rachel scanned what should have been a battlefield. Men threw down their weapons and raised their arms. A pair of seedwomen stood side by side, bows over their shoulders, one with a slender arm around the other, eyes wide and sparkling. A group of shouting drinlings dog-piled on top of one another, laughing raucously.

Everywhere she looked, Rachel found relief and jubilation. She witnessed celebrations great and small, demonstrative and quiet. These people had expected to die, but now they would live. They had come here hoping to free their homes from tyranny, and they had succeeded.

“He is gone,” Galloran said softly. “I felt Maldor’s Edomic right up until the blast. Now, nothing. Not a whisper of him.”

Sighing, Rachel leaned against a boulder. She could hardly believe Maldor was gone. Could it really be true? Had they really stopped him? As she contemplated the miracle of their success, she felt profound relief. She tried not to think about Ferrin and Tark. She tried not to dwell on all she had lost. She smiled when she saw a husky, bearded man running along with his arms flung wide, as if he were a soaring bird. She watched him grab a smaller man, perhaps a relative, and heave him over his shoulder. They had to be related. There was a resemblance, and a deep familiarity. Brothers, maybe. Or cousins. The bearded man spun, and the smaller man laughed, raising a fist.

Galloran came and leaned against the rock beside Rachel. His arm encircled her shoulders. His free hand stroked her hair. She leaned into him and wept.

\* \* \*

Many miles away, Jason was hiking out of the Fuming Waste with Aram and Corinne. Something in his pocket felt cold and wet. He gingerly retrieved Ferrin’s ear. It was clearly no longer connected to the displacer.

# HOMeward BOUND

Rachel sat alone in an airy, striped tent. More than five years ago, the oracle of Mianamon had informed her of a certain day when she could return to her proper time. As was inevitable with such deadlines, that day had finally arrived.

She wore a nondescript dress of coarse gray fabric. It was not identifiable as coming from another world. Even soaked and dirty, it should hold up well.

A word spoken mentally brought a hand mirror across the room to her. Rachel tried to remember what she had looked like at age thirteen. Her eyes were the same, but her cheeks and chin were more sculpted. She was a couple of inches taller. Her parents would recognize her, but she was no longer their little girl. She would be nineteen soon.

A muttered word brought an empty glass to her hand. A casual phrase filled it with water from the air. As she drank, she wondered how she would feel to speak Edomic and get no response. It was hard to imagine. Edomic had become as natural as breathing.

During the past four months, Rachel had studied at the Celestine Library. She had made three other prolonged visits to the library since the fall of Felrook. In that time she had mastered hundreds of new commands and read about thousands more. With tutoring from Farfalee, Rachel had learned to decipher the two most popular forms of Edomic shorthand that scribes had employed over the years.

Farfalee had been reborn with her left leg paralyzed. She was optimistic that her next rebirth from her new, undamaged seed would fully restore her. Farfalee had insisted that there was currently too much to learn and do for her to lose another three months in the ground. But Rachel felt certain that part of Farfalee's reluctance came from worry about learning for sure whether the paralyzed leg would be part of life for the rest of her existence.

The charm woman and a handful of other adepts had joined them on the island jointly guarded by seedfolk, drinlings, and soldiers from Trensicourt.



Rachel's extended periods of study had scarcely provided time to scratch the surface of the knowledge stockpiled there.

When it came to Edomic, none of the others could begin to compete with Rachel. Elaine could help tutor her regarding charms, but most of the rest Rachel had learned through reading and experimentation. Her abilities had grown exponentially.

But would she need to verbally summon fire in a world where the twist of a knob would heat a stovetop? Would she require telepathic communication when she could dial up a friend on a cell phone? For personal defense she could always carry pepper spray. She would probably not need it in the pleasant community where her parents lived.

Jason stepped into the tent, dressed like a prince on an adventure. "You look very generic."

"Thanks, I think."

"Mind if I come in?"

"Of course not."

"Aram just arrived. He brought his wife."

"I haven't seen her since the wedding!" Rachel said.

"We've missed you at Trensicourt."

"I was there most of the time," Rachel said. "It's only been a few months. I couldn't totally neglect the library. Farfalee would never have forgiven me. Besides, with my departure approaching, I wanted to make sure I learned all there was to know about getting in and out of Lyrian."

"Aram is the last," Jason said. "We're all here."

She nodded, setting down the mirror.

He was wrong. They were not all here. That was one of the big problems with Lyrian. It was full of ghosts. They had won the war, but at what cost? Chandra, Dorsio, Nia, Io, Nedwin. Tark. Drake. Ferrin. What good was saving the world if it meant losing your closest friends?

Rachel was grateful they had won. She was grateful for those who had survived. Nobody close to her had died since the day Felrook had been blasted into the stratosphere. Lyrian was free. Galloran had declined offers to become emperor, settling for restoring Trensicourt instead. But he could not prevent his legend from growing. Many kingdoms were rebuilding, and they all looked to him for advice and guidance.

The atmosphere in Lyrian had changed. For the first time in decades the future held real promise. The wizardborn were interacting with humans as never

before. But Rachel suspected that for her, Lyrian would always feel haunted.

“You’re still okay with going?” Jason checked.

Rachel tried to smile. “What other choice is there? One of us has to stay; one has to go. After all the things Darian got right, we can’t really argue with him.”

“He’s much too dead for arguments,” Jason agreed. “You kind of want to go anyhow, right?”

Rachel knew that Jason needed that to be true. He was too nice of a person, and they were too close. If he felt like he had forced her to leave Lyrian so that he could stay, he might feel guilty for the rest of his life.

“I feel the same way I’ve felt for a long time,” Rachel said honestly. “I want my parents to know that I’m alive. I want to see them again. But I’ll miss a lot of things. I’ll miss all my friends here. I’ve grown used to Lyrian. It’s hard to picture living elsewhere.” She was worried about what her voice might sound like if she expressed her deepest concern. “I’ll miss Edomic.”

Jason nodded, his eyes serious. “Do you need me to go instead?”

Rachel wondered how much he meant it. Enough to say it, at least, which was worth something. “This has always been the plan. Besides, Darian mentioned your daughter visiting him, which can’t happen if you aren’t in Lyrian.”

“He didn’t warn that it had to happen,” Jason said. “It might have just been a possible future. Who knows? Maybe my daughter could cross over like I did?”

“You’ve built much more of a life here than I have,” Rachel said frankly. “You’ve gotten closer to people. You’ve gotten involved. You run a huge estate. You employ people. You’re the Grand Duke of Caberton, along with your other titles. You could be chancellor if you wanted.”

Jason shook his head. “Nicholas is better for that job. At least for now.”

“Besides,” Rachel said, “Corinne would never forgive me.”

Jason had trouble hiding his grin as he looked away. “Did she say something?”

“I can just tell.”

“We’re just friends,” Jason insisted.

“I know,” Rachel said. “Good friends. No other guys get the attention she shows you.”

Jason shrugged, still unable to meet her eyes. He had it bad. “You never know.”

“Don’t worry,” Rachel said. “I’m going to leave, just like we planned. If it weren’t for my parents . . . and the prophecy . . . but there’s no point in thinking that way. I’m feeling better again. The anxiety comes and goes.”

“It’ll be strange without you,” Jason said. “I’ll be the last Beyonder.”

“Except for the lurkers,” Rachel corrected.

“I’ll have to stay tight with Corinne for that, if nothing else,” Jason said. “Even if Lurky Two does serve me, I don’t like it in my dreams. I prefer to have a translator.”

Rachel smiled faintly. She had often talked to his lurker for him. The lurker could understand Jason just fine when he spoke. It could even read his thoughts if he gave mental commands. But Jason couldn’t hear acknowledgments or responses. He’d be all right. He had Corinne to help, and Galloran if needed. The king managed his three torivor bodyguards just fine. Without telepathy Farfalee and Jasher communicated well enough with their indentured lurker, getting help from Elaine as needed.

Everyone would be fine. With Trensicourt leading the way, Lyrian was becoming more prosperous and stable every day. Her friends would be safe. “I’ll miss you.”

“Give it some time. Eventually this will all seem like a weird dream.”

Rachel shook her head. “I don’t think so. Too much has happened.”

“You’ll deliver my letter?”

“And the jewels. And I’ll develop the photos.” She was returning with lots of photographic evidence. Most of the shots had been taken after the war. It was hard to take pictures while running for your life. She would keep most of the images private, but some photos would accompany Jason’s letter.

“I’ll miss you too, Rachel,” Jason said gently.

Tears brimmed in her eyes. She looked down. “I’m doing this all wrong. I should never have allowed the rest of you to see me off. I should have gone through alone.”

Jason pulled her to her feet and hugged her. She hugged him back. He was tall and strong. “We wouldn’t have let you.”

Rachel held him tightly. Could they have ever become a couple? If they hadn’t known they would have to separate? Maybe. She certainly felt closer to Jason than to anyone. But it was pointless to think about. She was leaving. He was staying.

“If I hate it there, maybe I’ll come back,” she said. “I read a lot about ways between our worlds. It was my main emphasis these past months. There is no guaranteed way, but there are many tricks I could try.”

“Darian told us that one of us had to stay and one had to go,” Jason said. “He never said we had to go or stay forever.”

Rachel nodded. "I'll keep telling myself that maybe I'll come back someday. That makes this more doable. I have to go. Not only because of the prophecy. I have to see my parents. I have to let them know I'm all right. I have to be with them again."

"I know. Listen, if you ever make it back here, you're welcome to stay at my enormous castle."

She pushed away from him, giggling. "Are you ever serious?"

"I'm serious! Caberton keeps getting better and better. I'll even lend you some of my servants and share some of my gold and jewels."

"What if I come back and hundreds of years have passed?"

"I'll remember you in my will," Jason assured her. "You'll always have a home at Caberton. If anybody doubts you, just point at the monument."

Rachel smiled weakly. Even kidding around, it was hard to think about the monument. It had been completed shortly before she'd left Trensicourt for the last time. The great square near the castle had been renamed Hero Square. There she had been immortalized in stone, her statue more than twice her actual height. The craftsmanship was exceptional. The sculptors were the finest from across Lyrian, including several of the Amar Kabal.

The statue of Rachel did not stand alone. Beside her were Galloran, Jason, Corinne, Farfalee, Jasher, Aram, Kerick, Halco, Andrus, Delissa, and Nollin. All of the delegation who had set out from the Seven Vales and lived.

The dead from the delegation were represented on the other side of the square, including the drinlings who had joined them at Ebera. Io, Nia, Raz, Dorsio, Nedwin, Drake, Tark, and Ferrin were all rendered in lifelike detail. Ferrin held his smiling head in his hand. The sculptors had argued that it made his heritage as a displacer too obvious, but Galloran had insisted for that precise reason.

Rachel loved that her friends had been memorialized there. She appreciated the plaques and fountains commemorating others who had fallen. She respected the sacred feeling the location inspired. But she could not look at her friends without sobbing. After the dedication she had only visited Hero Square twice more—once to take pictures and once to say good-bye.

"Hey, don't get like that," Jason said, giving her a squeeze.

"I'm all right," Rachel said, realizing that her thoughts must have been written on her face.

"Somewhere Ferrin is laughing his guts out that his statue stands in a place of honor."

“Drake, too,” Rachel said.

“All of them, probably,” Jason realized. “I can’t imagine I’ll ever get used to that statue of me.”

“Whatever. You know you like it.”

“What?” Jason asked, unable to resist a smile. “Maybe a little.”

Rachel chuckled quietly. “I’m really leaving.”

“Looks that way.”

“I’m taking some treasure home. The necklace from Drake, of course, but some other stuff as well. I’m not sure if I’ll ever try to explain any of it or cash in some of the gemstones, but I thought it would beat returning empty-handed.”

“Good idea. You deserve some spoils after all you’ve done.” He nodded toward the opening of the tent. “They have food prepared. Everyone wants to see you.”

“I know. I’ve been stalling. I’m ready now.”

The feast was held in a huge pavilion. There were grand announcements celebrating all Rachel had done for Lyrian. There were cheers and applause. But mostly she enjoyed seeing her friends. Corinne, who got more beautiful every year. How could Jason possibly resist! And Galloran, who would never again need to blindfold his mismatched eyes. Aram’s lovely wife Brielle stood much taller than him, at least during the day. Rachel always found it strange to see the half giant dressed as a lord.

The meal was delicious, the praise generous, the conversations delightful, but everything felt fleeting. This was the end, and Rachel could not forget it. Regret and excitement warred within her.

The afternoon was waning when her closest friends escorted Rachel to the cave. They passed the guards and entered in silence. At one point they had to fall flat and slither forward. At last they came to a chamber where a clear pool hardly reflected the lamplight.

Rachel leaned over the side. “Look how far you can see.”

“It’s deep,” Jason told her. “And cold. You’ll sink until you think you might drown. But then you’ll emerge in a farmer’s field.”

*Thank you, Rachel, Galloran thought to her. Lyrian will forever be indebted.*

*You deserve more thanks than anyone, Rachel conveyed earnestly. Without you, Lyrian would not have been saved, and I would not be going home. Trensicourt could not have a finer king.*

They embraced.

“Are you talking in your minds again?” Jason complained.

“Sorry,” Rachel said. “It won’t be a problem much longer.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do without you,” Corinne said.

“You’ll be beautiful, and wonderful, and so happy,” Rachel replied, embracing her friend. “I’m sorry for everything I’ll miss. I’ll think about you always.”

She hugged and exchanged words with Farfalee and Jasher, Aram and Brielle, Elaine, Brin, and finally Jason.

“Take care,” Rachel said. “Have a marvelous life.”

“You too.”

There was much more she could say, but it was already too painful. She turned to Brin. “You have weights for me?”

Brin showed her a pair of iron weights at the edge of the pool with loops of rope attached to them. “Just hold tight and you’ll sink like an anchor.”

Rachel smiled at everyone through her tears. “I’ll make sure your letter reaches your parents,” she promised Jason. “And those huge gems as well. I won’t mess up the photographs.”

“Good-bye, Rachel,” Jason replied.

Rachel checked the pair of nondescript satchels over her shoulders. Brin had waterproofed them. She grabbed the ropes connected to the weights, then nodded at Brin. “Toss them in.”

Brin grabbed one weight; Jasher gripped the other. Both weights went into the pool, and Rachel went with them, letting their heaviness pull her forward and down. The water was shockingly cold, but she kept a tight grip on the ropes and sank rapidly. Rachel stared down into the darkness.

*Farewell, Corinne*, she conveyed.

*Farewell, Rachel*. The answer came faintly, as if from a mile away.

Rachel realized that if she let go of the weights, she could swim back up. Or had she already sunk too far? Would she drown in the attempt?

*Can you still hear me?* Rachel conveyed with all her might.

She sensed no answer.

Rachel tried not to panic as she ran out of air. Jason had warned it would be like this. She kept hold of the ropes, but it began to feel as if she was rising instead of sinking. Or maybe moving sideways. It was hard to stay oriented in the total darkness. The water seemed to be getting thicker, and it bothered her eyes enough that she closed them. Her speed seemed to increase. She collided with a yielding barrier, and suddenly she was on her back in a moonlit cornfield, spitting soil from her mouth as she gasped warm air into her starved lungs.

The scene was just as Jason had described, except he had arrived during the day. How late was it?

All her belongings had made it through with her. Standing, she tried to brush mud from her soaked dress with little success. She spoke words to extract the moisture. The Edomic command felt dead in her mouth. The water did not respond. She tried several commands. They all tasted like gibberish.

She had known this would happen, but she had not been prepared for the reality of Edomic feeling and performing like nonsense. It was as if the law of gravity had ceased to function. It was comparable to amputation or paralysis.

Slowing her breathing, Rachel fought the rising panic. What would she do without Edomic? She was stuck here. There was no sure way back! She thought of her parents, and her panic receded.

Turning in a circle, Rachel spotted a glow that suggested a farmhouse. Leaving the weights behind, she started walking.

Some of the lights were on in the house. Rachel opened the squeaky screen door and knocked. A middle-aged woman answered. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you," Rachel said. "I'm lost."

Looking Rachel up and down, the woman placed a startled hand against her chest. "Another one? How can—never mind—you poor thing! You're drenched! Come inside."

"Thank you."

"Don't tell me you lost your memory."

Rachel realized that she had better play it up. "Actually . . . I've felt really confused lately. Everything has been . . . hazy . . . disconnected. What year is it?"

The woman told her. Rachel nodded vaguely. It had been more than three years since she had disappeared. Rachel felt relieved that it had been long enough to explain why she looked older. The oracle had not let her down. "Can I use your phone?" Rachel asked.

The woman led Rachel to a telephone. Rachel had not punched digits into a phone in roughly six years. The number had not faded from her memory. She called her home. Her mother answered. The sound of her voice left Rachel momentarily frozen. Then, with a fluttering stomach, Rachel explained who was calling. Her mom freaked out, but in a good way. Rachel held the phone away from her ear during the worst of the shrieks and shouts. Soon her dad was on the line as well. Rachel could not resist her growing smile. Within the first thirty seconds their overflowing relief and joy made the decision worth it. Speaking

with them made Lyrian recede. Within minutes she felt much more firmly home than she had upon her arrival in the cornfield.

While she talked, Rachel fingered her satchel. Inside was the note Jason had let her read. Once she had developed her photos and made sure the appropriate pictures and valuables were bundled with the message and delivered to his parents, her obligations to Lyrian would be officially concluded. She did not need to open the letter to recall the contents.

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*You probably think I was eaten by a hippopotamus. I did jump into the hippo tank at the zoo, as I'm sure witnesses have reported. But the hippo did not kill me. This sounds unbelievable, but the hippo was a magical gateway to a place called Lyrian. I realize that no evidence can prove something so seemingly ridiculous, but I have included some jewels and photos to help.*

*My problem is that there is no sure way for me to travel back and forth between our worlds. I could come home, but it would probably mean never returning to Lyrian. I have built a good life here. I'm one of the leaders of the most powerful kingdom in this world. I have many close friends and important responsibilities. Lots of people count on me. I have a future here. And so I am never coming home from Lyrian. Instead, I am sending this message as both explanation and apology.*

*This is probably the last you will ever hear from me. I don't expect another chance to send a message. Please don't waste your energy looking for me. I am truly beyond your reach. I have risked my life many times to help save this land from a terrible threat. Several of my closest friends gave their lives. In the end we succeeded. As a result there is now so much potential here.*

*Please don't worry about me. I miss you, but I am also very happy. The first time I went to Lyrian was by accident. It was what really happened when I vanished. The amnesia was a cover story. I was never content after returning. This second time I came to Lyrian on purpose, and I am staying voluntarily. This is where I belong now. I love you both. My only regret about being here is that I will never see you again. Everything else is better than I could have hoped for.*

*There is no need to let others know about my true fate. It would just make us all look crazy. But I wanted you to know. Use your best judgment*



*on whether to tell any other family members. If you talk to them, tell them I love and miss them, too. Please take good care of Shadow.*

*You are wonderful parents. I appreciate all you have given me and all you have done for me. I'm sorry if my disappearance seems ungrateful. Please know that after everyone I have met here, and everything I have gone through, I never could have been satisfied in our world.*

*Sorry if I come across like a lunatic. Sorry if this note somehow makes my disappearance worse. I sent this with good intentions. I had to try.*

*All my love forever,  
Jason*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**W**ow! I can hardly believe I finished *Beyonders*. This was the first story I set out to tell as an author. I wrote the first draft of book one right after graduating from college. About four years later, the first book I ended up selling to a publisher was *Fablehaven*, and I wrote all five of those, plus *Candy Shop War*, before returning to *Beyonders*. By the time I got back to it, I had learned a lot as a writer, so I wanted to make some major adjustments, and my editor, Liesa Abrams, gave me a bunch of great suggestions that changed things even more. As a result, I totally rewrote the first *Beyonders* book, although I kept most of the same characters and problems. I feel lucky that the original version of *Beyonders* was never published, because I'm very pleased with how it turned out.

Thank you, dear reader, for sticking with me through this series. Your interest lets me do this for a living. Thank you for buying my books, for downloading my books, for telling people about my books, and for asking for them at the library. I love telling stories, and you enable me to keep doing it. I dedicated this book to you, and I meant it.

I need to give lots of thanks to Liesa Abrams, who worked long and hard on this book with me. This was a big story, and this last book had more extensive edits than any other I've written. Liesa did tons to make this story better. Simon Lipskar, my brilliant agent, not only helps keep me employed, but also contributed some really smart ideas that improved this story.

I owe a lot of thanks to the whole team at Simon & Schuster. This includes Mara Anastas, Bethany Buck, Anna McKean, Fiona Simpson, Paul Crichton, Lucille Rettino, Carolyn Swerdloff, Mary Marotta, and the entire sales team. They got behind this book in a big way. Thanks as well to Lauren Forte, Lisa Vega, Jeannie Ng, and James Riley.

Other early readers who gave feedback include Mary Mull, Sadie Mull, Bryson and Cherie Mull, Pamela Mull, Summer Mull, Jason and Natalie Conforto, Chris Schoebinger, Liz Saban, Wesley Saban, and the ever-diligent Tucker Davis.

My family deserves special thanks. My job makes me travel a lot, and I often have to write long hours, but they're supportive and patient, and my wife helps me work through all sorts of story issues. I love them very much.

Beyonders is over, but I have more stuff coming. It won't be long before some new series begin. I have really exciting ideas for future stories, and I can't wait to share them. You can find out more at [brandonmull.com](http://brandonmull.com), fan me on Facebook, or follow me on Twitter [@brandonmull](https://twitter.com/brandonmull).



**BRANDON MULL** is the author of the *Beyonders* series, as well as the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling *Fablehaven* series. He resides in Utah, in a happy little valley near the mouth of a canyon, with his wife and four children. Brandon's greatest regret is that he has but one life to give for Gondor.

**BRANDONMULL.COM**

Jacket design by Lisa Vega  
Jacket illustration © 2013 by Jason Chan Author photograph by Laura Hanifin copyright © 2013  
by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

# ALADDIN

Simon & Schuster, New York Meet the author,  
watch videos, and get extras at [KIDS.SimonandSchuster.com](http://KIDS.SimonandSchuster.com)

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

First Aladdin paperback edition February 2012

Text copyright © 2011 by Brandon Mull All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

ALADDIN is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc., and related logo is a registered trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Also available in an Aladdin hardcover edition.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event.

For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

The text of this book was set in Goudy Old Style.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows: Mull, Brandon, 1974— A world without heroes / Brandon Mull.

p. cm. — (Beyonders)

Summary: Fourteen-year-old Jason Walker is transported to a strange world called Lyrian, where he joins Rachel, who was also drawn there from our world, and a few rebels, to piece together the Word that can destroy the malicious wizard emperor, Maldor.

ISBN 978-1-4169-9792-4 (hardcover)

[1. Space and time—Fiction. 2. Revolutions—Fiction. 3. Wizards—fiction. 4. Magic—Fiction. 5. Heroes—Fiction. 6. Fantasy.] I. Title.

PZ7.M9112Wor 2011

[Fic] —dc22

**2010023437**

ISBN 978-1-4169-9793-1 (pbk)  
ISBN 978-1-4169-9798-6 (eBook)



This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

First Aladdin hardcover edition March 2012

Copyright © 2012 by Brandon Mull All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

ALADDIN is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc., and related logo is a registered trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

Designed by Lisa Vega

The text of this book was set in Goudy Oldstyle Std.

This book has been cataloged with the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4169-9794-8

ISBN 978-1-4169-9799-3 (eBook)

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

First Aladdin hardcover edition March 2013

Copyright © 2013 by Brandon Mull

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

ALADDIN is a trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc., and related logo is a registered trademark of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at

[www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

Designed by Lisa Vega

The text of this book was set in Goudy Old Style.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Mull, Brandon, 1974-

Chasing the prophecy / Brandon Mull. — 1st Aladdin hardcover ed.

p. cm. — (Beyonders ; bk. 3)

Summary: Jason and Rachel's adventures and friendships have made Lyrian more of a home to them than they could have imagined, so now, armed with the prophecy of a dying oracle, they are ready to become

Lyrian's heroes whatever the cost to themselves.

ISBN 978-1-4169-9796-2 (hardcover edition) — ISBN 978-1-4169-9800-6 (eBook. edition) [1. Space and time—Fiction. 2. Prophecies—Fiction. 3. Revolutions—Fiction. 4. Wizards—Fiction. 5. Magic—Fiction.

6. Heroes—Fiction. 7. Fantasy.] I. Title.

PZ7.M9112Ch 2013 [Fic]—dc23 2012035223